

## **Means of Transport**

The week started badly and was steadily deteriorating. Once the shops opened on Tuesday, two well-dressed men who could easily pass for his friends escorted Dimitar to buy his funeral suite and the trims. From then his schedule was pretty mundane - he was either sitting with Valkuda pouring over deeds and company memos, or it was Spas Nedelin, the chief accountant, who was guiding him through the floods of figures and complicated tax schemes. When neither one of them was available, he was left with the piles of files all by himself. He spoke several times with Konstantin, called France to make arrangements for his studio and to inform his friends that he would not be returning in the immediate future, called Stoyan to let him know of the situation and the old master tried to console him in his unique way. After Tanas closed the phone twice on him, the artist understood that it was a wasted effort to communicate with his folks. Valkuda however had received on Wednesday a curt call asking about the funeral arrangements. Viewing on Friday evening private at Varna's office, family and employees only, open to the public on Saturday morning for two hours before the mass at eleven, private goodbye at the cemetery right before burial, she had repeated the contents of the press release. Yes, the funeral agency was entrusted with the transportation of the body on Friday early morning in a specialized limousine they had equipped with a cooling system as the temperature was rising despite it was only mid-April. Yes, Varna office was already informed about the arrangements and they would take care about the cemetery. She was taking Thursday off to get some rest and asked not to be bothered unnecessary until she arrived in Varna on Friday. By the fact that she did not say goodbye Dimitar guessed the other side had hanged up in midsentence.

The security around the house was tightened, the window repaired and every single glass pane was covered with a protective film. Valkuda moved from her apartment to the third floor, bringing only her clothes and personal items which were not many. As she had predicted, the press was flooded with the news of Tanas' demise. Stories and opinions varied so wildly that for unbiased reader it would have been difficult to believe that the articles concerned the same man. But there were not unbiased readers where the Black Cardinal was concerned. Dimitar was taken aback to find that the events of half a century before were

burning points of debate, the wounds that should have been healed at least a fraction were opened to bleed. His head was swimming of too many newspapers, so he called Mitzi and asked for a few minutes to talk to her. The strangely subdued Mitzi invited him for afternoon tea on Thursday.

As Valkuda did not emerge up until three in the afternoon on Thursday, and the guards confirmed that she had not come down, Dimitar did the unprecedented - he went up to her floor without invitation. He knocked for a good minute before a sleepy voice yelled "Wait!" and the young woman emerged wrapped in a bed sheet, her black curls tussled. The sculptor's jaw dropped - he had never seen a woman so beautiful, she was the desire incarnated! The forms that the strict business attire barely hid were underlined by the sheet, tightly woven around them. The mass of hair that was usually rolled in an iron-stiff bun or braided in a long thick plate, was loosely framing her pale face and emphasizing the green of the heavy-leaded eyes and the soft pink of her lips. The sheet left visible two marble shoulders but the curls were doing their best to obscure them. She was barefoot and smelled of soap and sleep, soft, pulsating aroma, which made his head spin. He fought two vicious snakes in his chest - the desire to grab her and sink into her until there was no difference whose body it was that hosted the desire, and the jealousy, the raging, acidic jealousy towards the men in her life, as he was pretty sure that even his grandpa would have succumbed to such temptation. No man with blood still coursing in his veins could resist her. If he needed to carve Circe, he knew the perfect model - she did not need to sing to turn a man into an animal, he would turn himself voluntarily, just to be around.

The vision blinked and said, 'Come in, I will change in a jiffy!'

'No need to do that for me, please, I am used to models draped like that. I came to tell you that I am going to visit Mitzi; she invited me for tea and cookies at her place. I should be back by six-thirty and we can order some delivery or I may pass by and pick up something, if you tell me what you want.'

'Is your luggage ready for the trip?'

'Yes, I packed one mid-size suitcase; it is going to be three days only.'

'Do you need to put something in the safe or to take out?'

'No, I made a copy of that diary that I want to read on the road, but the original and the rings are in the safe, you put them yesterday. No need to take my camera bag with me, as there will be plenty of paparazzi around, whatever needs to be preserved for the history, they will shoot.'

'Well, enjoy the visit, I will see you later and then we will see about supper.'

Dimitar turned to go and saw on top of the alarm system a frame with a photo of a young man. He was dressed in a white shirt tightly buttoned and was looking straight into the camera, almost smiling. Definitely an artistic photo, fashionable sepia print, the background either a distant forest or a photo wallpaper. The rage surged again and before he could stop them, the words tumbled from his mouth, 'Who is the lucky one?'

'You know him!'

'I doubt it...'. There was something familiar in the face, but he could not concentrate. It was someone around she treasured enough to put as the last thing she saw before she left her place and the first one to greet her back. He squinted.

'My grandpa Tane. You have met him as an old man, but I like this photo better.'

'Nice! I see!' he was ready to dance right there and then, and in order to avoid any more embarrassment, said curtly, 'I will see you later then!'

Probably his ability to absorb surprises was reaching its limit, but Dimitar did not even raise a brow when Mitzi greeted his guard by name and send him alone to the kitchen to get what he wanted for a drink. She ushered the young sculptor to her study and sat across the low table set with various scrumptious sweets. There was a tea set also, as well as two cognac sniffers and a crystal bottle that looked more like an old-fashioned perfume than a drink. The bottle was like an onion that had been pressed flat and the front tear-shaped picture featured a crowned woman riding a dragon-like peacock above a fire. Like with the photo of Valkuda's grandfather, there was something familiar in the image, but Dimitar could not put his finger on it. Mitzi took him out of his misery.

'It is Courvoisier Erte's Distillation, the bottle that your grandfather sent me when you went to Stoyan. It is only fair to open it to toast him away.'

'You never opened it?'

'Well, I always hoped that one day we will sit the three of us and drink it all at the phenomenal success of your grand exhibition in Bulgaria, but it was not meant to be. I wish I did not wait for so long.'

'Mitzi, do you think that the people who would have drunk a bottle with Grandpa are more than the people who would smash it on his head, figure of speech, of course?'

'No, they are not. Your grandfather was not a simple man, Dimitar, and probably before we met over your work, I would not join the first group either. A lot of perceptions change with age - or with wisdom, depends which comes first. Your grandfather walked a long way. It had not been neither straight nor easy one. I am glad he found the light at the end and had the time to do a lot of good before he died. We have worked together on several projects in the last few years, may be Valkuda will tell you more about it, but I bet you will not read about them in the newspapers. He was a very private person, very proud one and did not bend easily. May be it was his utmost strength as well as ultimate problem. You see, the man he was in 1940-s and the man I met in 1990-s were the same man essentially, just his targets and values have shifted somewhat. I believe you are a great part of this change. It was for you he called me first and maybe I have the rare glimpse of Tanas actually asking for something rather than ordering it. You were the turning point, I believe. But I am becoming old and sentimental. How about you open the bottle?'

The sculptor touched lightly the perfect flowing lines of the rare decanter. Grandpa had chosen well, the cognac was exclusive, like the woman opposite to him, but she did not come in numbered bottles, God had broken the form after molding her. His grandfather had mentioned once upon a time that Mitzi had bridged a wide and well deserved ravine of mistrust and probably loathing helping him. There was something dark in their common history that was obscured by the dust of the years. His grandfather stubbornly refused to discuss it. With Grandpa gone, it was up to Mitzi to tell him, but looking at her sad face, Dimitar did not dare to ask. He was also frightened that he might not like what she would tell him, not at the moment when the emotions were flying high. He needed some time to adjust, to think it over for himself before he could dig deeper. The artist opened the bottle and poured a good measure to both of them.

'Tanas, I wish you a great journey!' Mitzi sighed and poured few drops in her teacup. Dimitar followed suite. The few drops were for the dead person, a repercussion of the ancient sacrifices. He sniffed the amber

liquid, then tasted it. The warmth of the dark swirls was like the sun distilled, the mellow tones of honey and toasted bread reminding him of the mornings when Tanas would share his breakfast asking about school and listening to the child's grievances over why the blue pencils always finished first or why the modeling paste was melting in the sun. The young man thought what it would have been if not for the sudden turn of events. Grandpa and he would go to Varna. The lemons and oranges would be in full bloom in the Sea Garden and he would be sipping something hot to counter his ice-cream on the terrace of the casino, the faint aroma of a cigar brought from faraway land wafting to him from the neighboring table. His grandfather never failed to order him his vanilla and chocolate ice-cream every time they went there. The sea would be again the color that no amount of spent blue pencils would ever capture, framed by the lush greenery of the garden. The salty tongue of the breeze would remind him of the pier where he learned to carve wood first. He and Grandpa would go down to the pier and then up and back home, which was not far away, the green and white building as beautiful as at the beginning of the century, carefully preserved. After the restitution, his grandfather had bought out the shares of the other owners and had relegated the first two floors to his offices and kept the third and the attic. The open roof terrace there was secluded; one may sunbathe in his Adam suit in total privacy. Dimitar would doze in the hammock and Tanas would go downstairs to make some calls and answer few letters, then they will dine the two of them on the terrace and talk about the future. It stroke the young man that his grandfather rarely talked about past if it did not concern Dimitar's work, the conversation was always about the plans, the ideas, the new challenges. It was as if life had a zipper that was being dragged by the elder Tanassov, efficiently sealing the time gone.

A softest 'clink' of a tea cup woke up the sculptor. He put down his almost empty snifter and looked sheepishly at Mitzi, 'I was somewhere far away, I am sorry!'

'I am sorry to get you back to reality as it was probably a nice place, as you were smiling. I apologize but I will not attend Tanas' funeral. Unfortunately it coincides with the funeral of my friends you met on Easter.'

'I understand. With all that press and stuff, I don't know how it is going to turn anyway. I am afraid it will be a place to show off rather than a funeral, but I don't have much saying in it. Grandpa had left some special arrangements about the will and the burial.'

'The rumors around have very long legs. Even I have heard about the scene at Tsarev's office, hopefully an exaggerated version of it.'

'It is real hard to exaggerate it, I think. Neither my brother nor my father will speak to me. And I even did not know about Grandpa's Napoleonic plans until he died...'

'What I will say will be tactless but I mean it - I don't think it is a great loss. These two have caused Tanas a lot of grief recently. He hated his name being drugged in the mud and they constantly generated new reasons for that. You see, as they are nothing special, the news would start with "The grandson of a prominent merchant had partied since the cows came home and then organized an impromptu 'Miss Wet T-Shirt" competition in the pub. Admirers of the participants disputed the ranges violently to a great loss of interior and bar contents. Seven police cars were at the scene in minutes but by the time of their arrival, the party boy had managed to slip away. The pub's insurance company was not called for the damage settlement, guess who had picked up the tab.'

Dimitar sighed. Mitzi poured him another measure of cognac and added some to her snifter.

'How about we anyway drink for your success? I believe Tanas would be glad if we do. Furthermore, there are projects that now I will have to finish with you instead of him. There is nothing urgent, take your time, talk to your advisors, then we will meet and talk again about it. Speaking of advisors, are you keeping Valkuda?'

'I doubt I am given a choice. She knows everything and I know nothing, Grandpa left her even the funeral arrangements, not to mention the management contract for ten years.'

The old woman heard the drop of jealousy in Dimitar's voice and decided to try settling the records straight, 'If it was not her, it would have been you, so you have been living on her time. She is very nice person, I think, very efficient and your grandfather praised her highly with good reason.'

'Yeah, up to the point that his last words were not to me, but to her...' the artist knew he was sulking. He wanted to unburden what had been troubling him since the scene at Easter; he just wanted it out of his system. He had another sip of the sunny liquid swirling in his glass and told Mitzi about the last words that Tanas had uttered before dying. He was looking again in the depths of his snifter and missed the death pallor that covered Mitzi's face. She bended, poured herself half a glass and drained it in one swallow.

“Damn, it was too good a cognac to drink it like that!” was her first thought, but then the world stopped spinning and she decided that it was worth it. Dimitar looked at her, ‘Do you know who this Todor is?’

Now that was a loaded question. The hostess looked at the garden and said, ‘Todor is a very common name. Your grandfather must have known hundreds of Todor during his life.’

‘I asked the bodyguards, I thought he was referring to one of them first, as he said he was ready to go.’

‘Going may be to different places, Dimitar...’ the words were soft but hit him like a train at full speed.

‘You mean that he, well, he was seeing someone from, ... from where nobody returns?’

‘I would not put it exactly like that, but yes, I was referring to the afterlife...May be your grandfather was referring to a death that had made a great impression on him, someone he remembered vividly...’ Mitzi was looking at her hands.

Dimitar felt her uneasiness and did not want to upset her further. Might be she also had had one too much encounters with the Lady with the Scythe recently. Older people had different perception about death, but for him Mitzi had never been old, may be that was his problem. He bravely smiled, took a random cookie and chewed on it, then get a sip of his cognac and enthused, ‘I think I will take on walnut cookies with cognac, that is a match made in heaven! Mitzi, how did I live to be so old without discovering it? Thank you so much for showing me the real way of enjoying it!’

His hostess looked at him and laughed, ‘He will be proud of you, my dear! It was his blood talking now, mark my words!’ She took a walnut cookie and bit heartily into it. ‘Indeed, how did I not know that before?’

At six-fifteen Dimitar hugged Mitzi at the door and looked up and down the street. His car was parked twenty meters away and he started towards it, but his bodyguard motioned to wait. Few seconds later in front of him a battered old Volvo wagon double parked and the blondie inside pushed open the passenger’s door, “Get in and fast!”

Dimitar was about to jump aside, when his bodyguard practically shoved him inside and slammed the door behind him. A lock clicked and the car sped up. The guard calmly went to the car with heavily tinted windows, sat down and started up the street also.

First was a wave of panic, then the blondie's advice registered, 'Put your seat belt, OK? I don't want to argue with traffic cops!'. Then it dawned to him that he knew that voice, it had been around him day and night for the last week. Valkuda? Clearly it was her voice, but her mom would pass by her at the street without recognizing her. His top manager sported a blond wig, expensive golden locks that would be mistaken for a naturally hers even at arm length, her eyes were hidden behind fashionable paste-encrusted purplish-blue sunglasses, dazzling earrings dangled from her ears; she was even sporting lipstick - a matching candy purple! She was dressed in something to provoke a heart attack - her flowery halter top was revealing the top lace of her bra and her green elastic skirt was well above her knees. How someone would be able to drive on such heels was a complete mystery to Dimitar. He released the breath he had been holding and pulled the seat belt.

'What was that, a show how vulnerable I am? It was not funny, you know!'

'I apologize; there was a last minute change of the plan. I could not afford to stand up and argue in front of the house. What are you holding, by the way?'

'A half-full bottle of the most expensive Courvoisier I have ever tried in my life.'

'You liked it so much that you asked Mitzi to give you the bottle?' Valkuda sounded scandalized. Dimitar snorted, 'No, I am not that bad, Mitzi gave it to me herself because it was the bottle that Grandpa had sent her when she did something for him personally. She said she wanted to drink it with him and me, but given that it is too late for him, we opened it and it is really good. She said to pour some on his grave after we bury him.'

'It is very considerate of her. I am sure your grandfather will appreciate the gesture.'

'Well, there is enough for him and for us for tonight for dinner. By the way, why are we turning here, aren't we going home?'

'We are.'

'But it is not the way to go home; you are driving in the wrong direction.'

'It is the right direction to Varna, so don't teach me how to drive.'

'Varna? We are going to Varna tomorrow.'

'No, we are getting an early start, and if that bothers you, we will be there probably tomorrow, albeit somewhat early, inshallah! Can you drive shifts?'

'Of course I can, I live in France, not on the Moon!'

'That is nice to know...' Valkuda was weaving in between lanes, 'I will appreciate if you drive for some part of the way.'

'Who will pick up my luggage?'

'It is on the back seat.'

Dimitar turned to look at the seat and despite the warmth of the day felt how the blood slowed in his veins. Half of the back seat, on the side of Valkuda, was folded. On it, up to the very end of the car, laid a long bundle carefully draped in insulating blankets, securely pinned down by seatbelts and ropes. Next to it laid a small carry-all and his suitcase. Dimitar mechanically took out the bottle from the package and guzzled some of its contents. The gaze of the young woman next to him did not leave the traffic which was easing. However she murmured, 'Remember you will be driving!'

Early on Friday morning the funeral agency that was entrusted with the last remains of Tanas Tanassov started work exceptionally early. Four men took the heavy oak casket and put it into the waiting limo under the watchful team of Tanassov's private security company. Two of the guards sat in the limo with the driver, the other two sat in a non-descript black car. The small cortege left the capital before the morning traffic started. Just before they were to enter the highway, the limo driver got an instruction from the guards in the second car to drive along the old way. He frowned but did as he was told. 'It would take at least another extra hour to reach Varna, why are they doing it?' he thought.

Exactly the same were the thoughts of the man driving a small white sports car following them from a distance. It was not hard, there were only so many black funeral limos on the road at that hour, the driver chuckled. That was the easy part, he had to follow them for another hour or so, after that his colleague would take over the shift. He picked up his cell phone to secure a meeting.

The white car was replaced by a funny tiny orange Fiat which was even easier to spot. So the network was working, grimly thought the passenger of the security car following the limo. He changed the route again only to find that on the highway there was a persistent blue Lada, which was not in a hurry to speed by them like the rare cars along the way. They have already negotiated the mountain and were driving on the flats. In another hour they would be in the middle of an agricultural land where even the tractors would be scarce at that time of the year. He asked his colleagues to push the speed of the limo a little bit then suddenly stopped at a fuel station. Both cars filled the tanks and went on. The Lada did the same, its driver pulling his hood tightly despite the warm weather. It was a question of time. The passenger of the security car started noting the road signs measuring the kilometers and was holding his cell phone tightly.

It lasted more than he had thought - they were less than half an hour away from the outskirts of the city when out of the blue a police patrol appeared in the middle of a deserted part of the road, next to some bushes. The passenger of the security car had already pressed his speed-dial button and the only thing he said was the nearest kilometer post before he closed the set. and tucked it deep between the seat and its back. The policeman did approach the limousine and when the driver opened the window, he pulled a gun and ordered him to open the doors. The guards jumped out, but out of the bushes came few more people with their rifles ready. They were wearing face masks and battle fatigues and did not look talkative like their leader who chuckled, 'An ordinary robbery, what do you expect, we will take the cargo only, I hate blood around, guys, and I like cell phones also, now, every cell phone politely given, keep your guns down and there will be no injuries, I doubt you carry a lot of money anyway, faster, kids, we don't have the day to stay here". The coffin was pulled out and the leader tried to open it.

'It is screwed over in five million places and sealed this one, it has reinforced frame, one of our best models,' the driver was definitely distraught.

'That is what we need also,' happily said the leader and kicked the coffin. It was heavy enough not to bulge.

'Fast, load it in the van and off we go!'

His team scurried to fulfill the command, then the beaten minivan which license plates was covered with caked mud, banged its doors and disappeared in the direction that the limo had come from. After it the blue Lada did the same, as well as the fake police car.

'Out of here, fast, guys!' yelled the passenger of the security car the second the cavalcade disappeared around the curve, tucking his gun back in its holder. His team did not need a second urging, one of the limo passengers took the driver's seat, the other shut the back door, got into the car and pulled the overwhelmed driver with him. Both cars peeled rubber and few seconds later the road was as deserted as it normally was on a working day.

The minivan and its escort rattled from the highway into a secondary road full of bumps and holes. Its cargo was jumping at every one of them, sliding on the iron floor and hitting the men crouching next to it. It bumped the rusty door twice and they yelled at the driver to go slower or they would lose the box. The slowing angered their boss who had disposed of his mask and was grinning. The cars left the bumpy road for a unmarked dirt path among the fields, leading to a remote semi-destroyed agricultural complex of sort. The road was real bad, rain and snow had torn into it and the wind had saw wild flowers over the ravines, so the group advanced cautiously. They reached the buildings and one of the men jumped to open the heavy gates of what had been once a barn. The three cars entered the decrepit place. Several men unloaded the coffin and put it under one of the big holes in the roof which provided some early afternoon sun.

'I don't need boxes for home decoration, so use whatever you find to open this!' the leader dragged superciliously. The team started working on the numerous fastenings with screwdrivers, but soon it became evident that the seals were tighter. A hammer was pulled, then few levers and finally with a loud protracted screech the coffin's cover was pried open. Few more tugs and it fell aside. The young man approached the contents heavily draped in white cloth.

'Nice try to get him there good looking, but we will see to that,' he said to nobody in particular. He pulled one layer, then another, then a third one, then he looked at the contents again and growled. The men around superstitiously pulled aside. They did not need to do that. The coffin was full of crushed ice, neatly packed in Ziploc bags that were taped together. On the top of the first one there was a note, also in Ziploc bag. The

young man pulled it out and read to himself, "The most important quality in a man is to know when to push and when to stop pushing. If you are reading this, you had not cultivated it yet. What a pity! Your grandfather." The note was laid on its place and the young man shot all the ammunition in his gun at it. The sun rays blinked on the flying shards of ice.

The limousine driver hysterically refused to return to Sofia by car, so after a brief call to his boss, Valkuda put him on the plane with two of the guards and arranged for the limo to be returned by train. The remaining two joined her and Dimitar for dinner at Tanassov's house and camped in one of the rooms on the third floor. The overnight security was tightened, but it was not required - the neighboring elderly ladies came in their black Sunday dresses and vowed to stay the vigil for the poor man had left no wife to mourn for him. Some of them remembered her, some of them had come out of curiosity, but once there they were caught in the moment and not a single one dared to leave in fear that she would be singled out in their subsequent gossips. The old women patted Dimitar and Valkuda's shoulders, telling them how much they have grown and how good it was that they have come to the funeral, as if they doubted any of the relatives would show. The black-clad mourners reminded Dimitar of crows, that omnipresent signs of death, which also served as sanitary guardians in nature. He resigned to the caress of their gnarled fingers and that was the moment when he understood the finality of it all. He had no way back to his happy days of freedom, he was responsible for the name that had brought these women out of their homes and in the house of mourning, he had to continue what his grandfather has started as that was the way the river of life was going on and he had to either flow with it or be dragged with it against his will. The old women urged him to go catch some sleep and he went to the terrace, where Valkuda was sitting alone and reading something on her laptop. The greenish light that reflected of her face made her look surreal. Dimitar sat heavily on the rattan chair, she took her gaze from the computer and at the look on his face went and brought him a glass of the most expensive cognac he had ever drunk.

One of the guards woke up Dimitar half an hour before the public viewing. He had time to shave, get into his suit and run downstairs where a cup of coffee was waiting for him on his grandfather's desk next to a hot

scone with marmalade. He finished the breakfast in three bites and two swallows and inquired where Valkuda was.

'She asked for a minute to say goodbye to Mr. Tanassov in private and went upstairs, may be she thinks you are not up yet.'

Dimitar was puzzled - the private goodbye was scheduled at the cemetery and Valkuda had plenty of time to say it before during that drive that he still shivered about. He went to the big conference hall where his grandfather was laid in his custom-made coffin. The guard that was in stood up and left at his arrival. Few seconds after that Valkuda entered carrying her handbag that was more of a crossover between an office and a suitcase.

'I did not plan for you to see that, I am sorry.'

'To see you saying goodbye to Grandpa? Excuse me for disturbing the privacy of you two...' Dimitar turned to leave.

'It is not what you think again, you definitely can stay.'

'I can't pass by such a generous invitation; finally the house is mine only since yesterday!' the young man was trying unsuccessfully to throttle the green-eyed monster of jealousy in his guts, to repeat that his grandfather was dead and what had been between them had died with him, but she wanted to be alone even with the dead man and he did not like it, not if he could prevent it. He sat at the chair next to the coffin in the row reserved for the grieving family that had yet to show up.

Valkuda's eyes glistened. She pulled from her bag's bottomless pit a solid dagger or so it seemed to Dimitar. She then bended closely to his grandfather's head in almost a lover's embrace and used the blade to open his mouth a tiny bit, then pushed something inside and pulled the knife, which went back into her bag. The sculptor blinked few times. It had been so fast that he was not even sure whether it had been real or his brain was playing tricks after a week of shocks and sleep deprivation.

'What was that?' he asked bluntly as there was no reasonable way to ask otherwise.

'It was his coin. I hope a silver fifty leva should be sufficient, I don't know what the prices are there!'

Dimitar remembered his grandfather's last request to Valkuda. She was the one to put in his mouth a coin for him to pay for his fare across the river of the dead. No way, his grandfather did not believe in that. But he

did ask and she did not forget it, so may be there was more between them that he did not know. For one, he had no idea that daggers were a standard equipment of a lady's handbag. For two, he had no idea office managers were so good with daggers and dead people and so savvy about Charon's transportation charges. Scrap that, she was good at estimation of transportation costs. Nobody had come back to bring the tariffs. The young man grabbed the hand of the woman across from him with both his hands, raised it to his lips while looking straight into the green eyes and murmured, 'Thank you for doing it, he has enough of a start capital if he needs more!'

She did not pull her hand immediately and with his peripheral vision Dimitar thought his grandfather's lips twitched in a smile. But of course it was only an odd shadow from the curtain that the sea breeze was moving.

Dimitar's father and the blondie came halfway through the public viewing, Tanas Jr. came few minutes later. Valkuda occupied herself with the last minute details as the people who had come from Sofia were more than expected and come organization was needed to fit everyone in the tight schedule. The mass was a blur of burning frankincense, the singing of the choir and the sobs of the neighboring grandmas, the flicking flames of hundreds of candles in the hands of people packing the grand place to capacity. The news about Tanas Sr.'s will had reached the sea capital of the country. It was palpable in the length of the handshakes, the profusion of condolences, in the innumerable offers for a diner or lunch "whenever you can spare a minute, I will call your office manager to arrange it", compared to the curt nods and superficial touch of hands for his brother and father. The hatred in their glares could not be mistaken for a grief even by the most socially inept. The blondie was looking scared and ready to run if not for the restraining force of Dimitar's father steel grip on her wrist.

The black limo followed by a security car stopped few meters away from the freshly dug grave. The local priest nervously looked at the unsmiling group coming towards them. He had been saying last prayers for over thirty years and knew that funerals did not inspire a lot of cheer, but the atmosphere was not supposed to be of such a egregious hatred, death made everyone equal. The security was making him upset also,

there were simply too many men around for whom the black was not a mourning color, but a working uniform, like his robes.

'The private farewell is for the family, you two should get out of here right now!' seethed Tanas Jr. through clenched teeth, looking at Valkuda and Tsarev, who were staying behind Dimitar.

'Tanas, it is a graveyard, for God's sake, stop!'

'I said get out!'

'Mr. Tanassov, both Mr. Tsarev and I are here under the express requirement of your grandfather and I have his personally handwritten instruction about it!' Valkuda was definitely making an effort to stay calm.

'Show me!'

Valkuda did not even look in her handbag while pulling a sheet of paper and handing it to Tanas Jr. He scanned it for a few seconds, the veins at his temples throbbing. Then he tore it once, then again and again until the pieces were as small as confetti, and threw them in the air.

'I believe you understand that you destroyed a copy,' in the voice of the young woman there were few amused tones. 'I also believe that I told you back in Sofia that the security had been instructed to execute your grandfather's funeral wishes with or without your cooperation.' She looked around at the men in black standing like avenging angels short distance away.

'It would be preferable if we do not make scenes, Mr. Tanassov!' said Tsarev. 'The most harm will be to your reputation, I doubt it will hurt your grandfather any more!'

Tanas looked around again, spat on the ground and moved closer to his father. The elder Tanassov barked at the priest 'Go on!'

The coffin was closed and lowered, everyone present threw a handful of soil over its lid and two gravediggers quickly filled the hole. Two more men in working clothes emerged carrying two buckets of cement each and then brought several heavy wood rollers. It was evident that they were planning to seal the grave with the two massive marble plates that were set aside. Valkuda pulled from the bottomless depths of her bag Mitzi's bottle and handed it to Dimitar. He made a generous sign of the cross with the clear amber

liquid and looked at the small amount remaining in the crystal decanter. The young man carefully closed the bottle and after a second of hesitation put it in the grave approximately at the point where his grandfather's right hand would be. 'Enjoy!' he murmured and met the look of his top manager. Valkuda's cheeks were wet with tears and the hand of Andon Tsarev was protectively curled around her shoulders. Almighty God, was there ever a man who did not like her except his brother and father?

Two of Tanassov's security guards circled around the cemetery section until the cement that fixed the marbles of the grave set firmly. Only then they left - two more men in dark suits did not make anybody suspicious at a place where dark suits were de rigueur.

'Valkuda, have you taken my copy of the diary?' asked Dimitar after the dinner they had shared at the Casino with Tsarev and his two partners who had decided to stay overnight and drive back to Sofia the next morning.

'No, I have not. May be you put it somewhere else?'

'I read a little bit yesterday night and put the first clip on my night stand. Now it is not there.'

'What does it mean, "the first clip"?''

'When I copied it, I thought how to bind it together, as some pages were written up to the edges, so I took a big black clip and tried to stuff it in it. Most of it fit, but there were twenty or so pages that I could not fit, so I put them in a small clip. The second bundle is in the wardrobe but the first one is gone. I thought you may have been interested...'

'Dimitar, if I were interested, I would have asked your permission to borrow it first.'

'May be some of the guards then...'

'That is not possible; they will simply not do such a thing. Did you bring anybody upstairs?'

'Yes, sure, a whole bunch of folk singers! You have been with me all day, haven't you?'

'Let me ask the guards. You want to come?'

'Let's go!'

'I did not know that I should not let Mr. Tanassov upstairs, I am really sorry!' the young man was obviously distressed. 'He said that he is just going to use the bathroom as downstairs there were too many people, he was back in not more than two minutes, and he had nothing in his hands, I am sure about it!'

'Stoyan, calm down, nothing crucial happened, I just wanted to know. Next time I should be more specific about my instructions, that is all!' Valkuda's face did not show a shred of emotion. 'Just for the records, no other Tanassovs are to enter the private part here or in Sofia without the personal explicit permission of Mr. Dimitar Tanassov, please make it sure that the entire group is aware of that, Matey!' she was looking straight into the face of the chief of the guards in Sofia. The men nodded.

'I did not think that my brother would be so fast!' Dimitar exclaimed when they were alone on the roof terrace.

'The good part is that he got away with only a copy and it is not the entire diary anyway. He should not make it far, we will just have to watch him closely.'

'Why shall we do that, the diary is about a fairytale. What can you do with a fairytale?'

'You have not read enough yet to know!'

'And how do you know that if you have not read it at all, you told me that it was the first time you have seen the diary when I showed it to you?'

'I have not read the diary; that is correct. But that does not mean I don't know more about the fairytale and the way to make it work...'

'That does not answer the question how do you know...'

'It is a long story and I am really tired, how about another day.'

She was evading the question, but Dimitar was not inclined to insist. "You can bring the horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink!" had said the old gypsy who had taught him carving first when Dimitar had suggested he could bring his brother to learn as well. The day had been long and the week horrible, that was true. May be her suggestion had a reason.

Why he did not mention a word about the pack of sheets he had stolen to his father was beyond Tanas. Not that he shared a lot with him since the will was open, but did want not to sever the ties as of yet. If he managed to find the way to get Dimitar out of the picture efficiently, then his father would inherit the main chunk and Tanas did not want to be left out of the partition. Oh, but he would not be like his fool of a father, he would make sure that while dear daddy was still alive, Tanas would be his only heir, or would be like his snake of a brother, proactive and secure whatever he could reach. Tanas seethed still at the deceptively innocent look of Dimitar at the Easter dinner. Who could think that the shy, artistic git would prove so much more Tanassov than both of them! When did their grandfather had the time to teach him the tricks of the trade? As far as everybody knew, his little brother has spent the last few years first studying with a secluded sculptor and then on his own in Paris recently. He may also be learning something more than cutting stupid wood figurines like the old gypsy at the pier that he wanted to introduce him so long ago. A gypsy! Why would Tanas be interested in a wandering penniless ancient man who never knew where his next meal would come from?

The sky was blue over Brashlyan and the happy spring sun was warming the figures of the few people who were seeing Elka and Konstantin in their last journey. The funeral agency that Konstantin had hired did all the transportation and around the double grave were standing only Alexandar and Bilyana, Georgi and Lorelei, Konstantin, Mitzi and Rada, surrounded by the entire population of the village, as well as Mother Ephrosinia and the three elderly nuns. Father Ivan read the ancient words of solace and the two simple coffins were lowered down on the strong hands of the couple's son and grandsons. The villagers had followed the ancient tradition to prepare food for the grieving family and they all sat in the old house spacious yard. Memories were exchanged, some before Alexandar was born, some from the time when Konstantin and Georgi were running around with some eternal pranks, some including Mitzi, who the village considered one of their own for her frequent visits and active involvement in the life and fortunes of the district. The life was going on like centuries before at the same place, its cycle not perturbed by the mere change of players.

In the early afternoon the funeral agency's cars took everyone who had come from Sofia back except for Konstantin who stayed as his grandparents required. The house had been closed a little more over ten days and it was not much that he had to do than to dust around and open the windows. He found in the kitchen that Mitzi had stuffed the fridge with all kinds of cheese and cold cuts enough to feed a small batch of people and thanked her generous soul who had thought of him, the city boy, who had forgotten that there were no supermarkets in Brashlyan. There was frozen bread in the freezer and he thought that that fridge had not been there last time he had visited his grandparents. Their old rambling ZIL that Konstantin remembered since he was born had been replaced by an industrial size double door machine with two separate compressors and place to store an entire cow if needed. That was surprising, his grandparents had not been keen on frozen stuff, his gran preferring to do the preserves the old-fashioned way. He opened the nearby cold room and yes, there were the strict lines of hundreds of jars full of every home preserve one could think of - paprikash from the peppers and tomatoes grown in the garden, baked egg plants, marinated egg plants, vegetable medleys of all sorts, small cucumbers pickled with garlic and dill, the garlic pickled by itself only, marmalades, jams and compotes, jars and jars of honey, each carefully labeled. He could live there without leaving the village for probably an year and not get hungry, he smiled. That was a nice thought, as he remembered that he did not have any means of transportation. There was a bus that came once a week to Brashlyan but if it was so pressing he could either call for a taxi from Tsarevo or walk to the highway and hitchhike from there. Last time he had checked the bus was on Tuesdays and was coming back to the village the same day in the evening. Both Father Ivan and Mother Superior had expressed their desire to talk to him when he felt ready. The following day should be good for Mother Ephrosinia as probably Father Ivan would be busy with the Sunday liturgy, Konstantin reasoned. He went upstairs to his gran's "cabinet", the room where Elka had spent countless hours embroidering her delicate works and where the TV and the computer were situated. He chuckled at his gran's organization - there was a sheet in her handwriting next to the keyboard, with all her accounts and passwords, including who to contact if the connection was giving her trouble, it was written: "to call Kiril if the connection does not behave properly" and a phone number. Konstantin imagined that Kiril as an old man, waving a finger to the modem to behave before departing. The young man sat in front of the screen and sent quick messages to his friends that he

was out of reach except by e-mail and that he would not be in Sofia for another month. Diana had given him the forty-day unpaid leave grudgingly but he had explained to her the strange request and she had understood. Konstantin had more time on his hands that he had ever had. It was prudent to start it fresh and he went for a good sleep first.