

Surprise, Surprise!

The night shift on Monday was surprised to be asked to meet with the boss one by one and was expecting a bad start of the week. After the second colleague emerged happy as a clam and as talkative as one, they relaxed. The receptionist was taken aback to be addressed by her full given name and to learn that no matter that she was Columbina for all official purposes that did not entitle her to dress like Commedia dell'arte performer. She was assured that she would be paid full wages for the day and sent with some money to buy herself a business suit complemented by white shirt and shoes which heels should not exceed two inches high or wide. The young woman was instructed to have her nails done in a color different from the vibrant blue she sported. She was still hiccupping from the unexpected turn in her career when the morning shift arrived and was also asked to meet the boss personally and confidentially. They were even more confused to see coming every person who had not been on duty in the last twenty-four hours and the dispatchers were shrugging their complete ignorance on the matter. The meetings rarely extended for more than three minutes, and the people coming out were mum, but grinning and leaving immediately, waving at the temporary receptionist Vasko.

Few people would have to go, Valkuda had been right in her evaluation, Tanas reflected looking at the last few cars leaving the internal parking lot. Those were the hopeless ones, they were not a lot and with some inventive shifting and cutting some not profitable contracts, the core staff should be able to cover the work. The men needed more training and were afraid of him, damn it. Not that it was them to blame for it, Tanas banged his fist on the windowsill, it had been his own doing. They have seen too much of him recently and were torn between the desire to bolt and the necessity to feed their families. Some were as old as his father and that meant old enough to be wary that finding a new job could prove impossible. Speaking of people the same age, that Opel gliding into the parking lot belonged to Elvira. Vasko better be good.

The accountant was not bothered much about being late - it had been customary to party with Tanassovs and to come to work after midday although she usually showed around ten on good days. She had gone out Sunday with the usual crowd and had learned that Tanas had been spotted in the company of his brother and Valkuda that had attached herself to Dimitar surgically at the horse club where the three of them had dined, argued and read some newspapers. She had bought the newspapers on the way home and had admired that rare, typically Tanassov's, skill to turn everything into PR campaign. Tanas had not wasted time - he was just the next perfect manipulator that his family had produced over the years. The ridiculous part was the tandem with brother dear; he could not stand the guy after the robbery that Tanas Sr. had organized with him. Might be they were discussing the estate on neutral ground and orchestrating the return of Tanas from the madhouse. What a stupid idea, to play delirious to get in there - granted, a very good reason not to show to Tanassov after the failure with that Rada doctor. He was a good actor, that one, just like his dad, to scare to death the guards and keep the doctors convinced that he had had a stroke, him of all people. Tanassovs were all sturdy like battle-axes; the oldest one had been running like a fairy wheel since the dawn of time. Elvira had been so surprised to hear about his death, he acted as if he was immortal. But the trick he did to his son, it was to die for. Who could imagine that the sop of a sculptor would outwit his own dad and to add insult to injury - from afar? She had seen him for the first time after decades of absence only at the old man's funeral and he did not look that smart. Blood was a fascinating thing though; he had done it while pretending to be nice and fluffy. Or may be not, that snake hanging on his sleeve was the reason, first she had sucked the old man and then arranged for the most pliant of Tanassovs to inherit it. What a force she had been holding over the old Tanassov for him to name her an heir in case his preferred grandson died. Then she had leeches on the grandson just in case he did not follow grandpa's instruction and would not marry her. She was better as a widow; she would not have to share the money even with the harmless artist. Elvira was sure the snake was biding her time to save on the estate taxes. Estates between relatives in a direct line were not taxed, not that there was much left to be transferred, but still there were the house in Sofia and the one in Varna. The big shot was the entire scope that Dimitar was holding at the moment. When she put a ring on his finger, he was doomed. Estates between spouses were not taxed either and the law did not make a difference if the marriage had lasted five weeks or five decades. For few months with Tanassov that painted doll that played the humble widow at the funeral had gotten

herself a decent lifetime income. And even without the strings whether she remarried or not, clean money. Who would have known!

'No, Mr. Tanassov, I called her cell phone twice already and it is not answering. I tried her husband's one and that one is not answering also, I left messages for both of them to call!'

'Good morning, whose phone is not answering?'

'Maria had not shown up. She was looking so ill on Friday, I thought that she might have gotten one of these awful summer infections and sent her home not to spread it around!'

'Poor girl, I thought she had not been well as well! May be she went to the hospital with her husband, the cells have to be switched off there and she will call later!'

'Anyway, if she is ill, she better keep away from here, I don't need anything contagious to get to any of us, we are understaffed anyway. May be you would like to look for a temp?'

'I will see, if she had done the payroll, then I will cope for few days alone, she should be better by then!'

'Oh, she left me some key to give to you, but she was so green under the gills, I did not want to stay around her for too long. She said you know what it is about! I hope you do, but if I were you, I would disinfect it first, where did I put it?! I thought living it with the reception as I was thinking about going for lunch. Would you like to join me, by the way?'

Tanas took out the safe key wrapped in a paper towel. Elvira knew how fussy he was about cleanliness and did not doubt that if he had thought Maria was ill, he would have shooed her faster than she could say her name. The accountant's face lit up.

'Of course I will join you, where is Binka? Is she also ill?'

'No, but she was dressed to impress in the wrong way. I sent her to revamp the image. Vasko will man the reception, so to speak,' Tanas chuckled and looked at the young lad.

'Vasko, you are the first to know, but we will discuss with Mrs. Palikareva a new image for the agency and I don't want we to be disturbed while eating, no call transfers, take messages and we will take care about everything later!'

They talked about everything and nothing but for three hours, Tanas thought with glee, passed through the central bank branch for him to withdraw some money from his safe, returned to the office and after verifying few small things it was too late for Elvira to go to the bank. But she seemed not in a hurry, possibly because she had not expected the key. At four-thirty Tanas called it a day and the entire office left in excellent mood.

Raina was as good as her word and when he showed up at the office with the discrete sign "Diana Nalbantova, Notary", she was already there with Mrs. Hlebarova. The three women were going over town's gossips under the tunes of some classic music from the radio. The notary looked about Raina's age and the classic was for the elderly lady. After the expected pleasantries Diana read them the sale and started the "sign here, sign there" routine. The music changed to a sextet that sounded vaguely familiar to Tanas and his ears strained automatically. The more the six invisible actors sang, the more he was sure that it was the piece that Margarita had played in his dream on Sunday morning. The station was broadcasting popular classic so he had heard the piece many times, he reasoned, but the coincidence was unnerving. Tanas tried to remember what his grandmother had said when she put the needle on the vinyl - to listen, but not only to the music. Nice advice, especially if the opera was sung in Italian of which he could say "Chiao, bella!" and "lavatrice" because of the annoyingly frequent ad for washing machine of some sort. He caught the slight hand movement of Mrs. Hlebarova who subconsciously was conducting the piece flowing from the stereo system without even interrupting her conversation with the two young women. She was an angel, she had been at the Music School with his grandmother, she was bound to know that piece! Tanas caught her eyes and politely asked what they were listening to.

'Why, *Questo è il fin di chi fa mal*, Mozart's Don Giovanni, the final chorus! Your grandma adored this opera. I can see her sitting and singing "Such is the end of the evildoer: the death of a sinner always reflects his life", but it was before you were born, of course. At that time one would not be considered odd for singing opera's aria with friends. May be your grandfather had played it and you remember, he liked it himself.'

Tanas did not trust his voice and only nodded. The good woman thought how tactless she had been to remind him of his grandfather who had died so recently. She had seen the touching scene where Tanas was wiping Margarita's portrait at the cemetery and her heart had broken over the thought that the boy had never met the great lady her friend had been before her illness, yet cherished her memory. That was his

grandfather's doing; Tanas had been faithful to his wife in good and in bad, in health and in illness. One could only admire that and his grandson had paid them an ultimate tribute on Saturday. No matter what those stupid journalists decided to write, the pictures were talking for themselves! The old teacher thought about the added security another person living nearby would provide, especially a man who ran a security agency and who she could trust. There had been many awful stories about elderly people found dead for living alone, who had either died because there had been nobody around to help in the right moment or victims of ever increasing home robberies. The boy had Margarita's absolute pitch, how otherwise one of his generation could remember an opera aria when around there was only that pseudo-folk. He would hear if something was not right downstairs, she was sure of that. The thought made her feel fortunate of her decision to sell the attic and she was grateful to Raina for the buyer she had found her. The sooner he moved in, the better.

'Do you plan some extensive repairs, Mr. Tanassov?' The young notary may have read her thoughts. 'You should consider some recent restrictions that the city had put on to preserve the historic face of the center, that is why I am asking.'

'No, I like the place as it is. I would like to ask only for your patience when I find a person to refinish the floors, hopefully soon.'

'But of course, I redid the floors of the main floor this very spring. I should have done the attic also! Would you like me to contact the same guy, he did a very high quality work for me? Oh, wait, it will be my welcome gift for you! I will arrange it and I will pay for that!' - Mrs. Hlebarova was warming to the idea. Ilia had been nice and competent and she was sure she could convince him to do the job fast. She was rich now, she could afford it and it would be real pleasure to do something for Margarita's grandson. After her illness Matey had discussed with her countless times what they could do to help Tanas, but he had been so stubbornly proud to accept compassion. It was her chance to pay him tribute by helping his grandson.

'It is very kind, but I can't accept, it is too much!'

'Nonsense! Don't be as hard-headed as your grandpa, I know the pattern!' Mrs. Hlebarova said in her most lofty schoolmarm voice to take the edge of the stern words. Everybody snickered and the old lady waved that the question is closed for discussion. She handed him the keys and vowed to call him about the floors. After driving her home Tanas took Raina and Diana for diner and learned tons of gossips. He also found

how convenient it was to hide behind a doctors' order to stay sober and thought that Stavros had been right on that account also, madhouse had not been a mistake. He should buy a gift certificate to the guy who chose his hospital, he should. Luck was with him to the end - Diana lived closer to his home, they had to deliver Raina first and he was spared a coffee invitation. That should have bothered him but it did not.

Never underestimate grannies. Ilia had got the call as soon as Mrs. Hlebarova had reached her phone book. For the next day he had planned a mini break to go fishing with some friends. The man knew what would happen to him if he said that aloud as an excuse why he could not redo her attic floor immediately. He was wrapping the conversation when his mom strolled into the room and heard the familiar name. She had been Siran's classmate and took the receiver to chat a little. Her happiness for her friend's successful sale turned to outrage at her son. It was unthinkable that he would go spend the time at the sea with a bunch of beer-drinkers instead of helping a lady as soon as he could. Ilia sighed, he knew that there were more chances that the fish would come willingly out of the water, bait the hook and swallow it, than for him to go fishing under the circumstances. Mrs. Hlebarova was assured that he would show up first thing in the morning even before he could open his mouth to argue. He was livid.

'No need to make faces! You will have enough time to go and swill some beer between the first and the second layer of lacquer!' said the home expert.

He loved her dearly, he honestly did, to swallow that.

The phone was ringing and ringing. Elvira shook her head to wake up and shouted 'You see I am coming!', but the answering machine clicked first. The accountant heard Tanas' voice who was very upset over some documents and insisted that she showed at the office immediately as she had the only keys for her office. Damn, she was thinking about going to the bank to order a new safe and transfer the money from the other one. Her own box was too small for the amount, even if she unpacked everything. The wraps were not necessary any more, she grinned, there would be no recount and no sharing. It would take time though; even upgrading the box for a bigger one would take long with those sloppy bank clerks. She had calculated that if she showed at the bank at the opening at nine, she should be able to sort at least the upgrade until ten-thirty and show at the office at eleven, but there was no need to make Tanas suspicious. She could start

in the afternoon when she should go instead of Maria to do a deposit to the legal account. It may take her more than expected, she smiled thinly, and then she would feel bad because of the heat and go home, nobody would check that. Elvira dressed and drove to the office.

Finding the documents took her more than anticipated - Elvira was sure she knew where they had been, but it had been a while since they have been needed and may be she had shifted them and forgotten. For lunch Tanas ordered sandwiches from the local bistro and organized a meeting with Binka to discuss how she could help the accountant in the absence of Maria, whose cell was still silent. After that Elvira complained of the heat and started preparing to go to the bank. Tanas immediately offered her a ride with him as he needed to have a look at some personal matters at the same branch. There was no reasonable way to refuse and grudgingly the accountant rode with him, deposited the money and was driven back to work in the perfect comfort of the company's air conditioned car, where the temperature was freezing rather than scorching. There was always tomorrow, she thought.

'I was thinking about one more location for the company to expand and I was planning to go with Dad. We will go tomorrow with you as I want a second opinion. I hope you have no other plans, we will be back before midday. I will pick you up around ten from your place,' Tanas said just before she went home. Damn his timing, she thought.

Tanas had picked Elvira and was going to start the car when his phone rang. Mrs. Hlebarova was highly proud of herself and invited him to see his new floor whenever he wanted. He apologized to the accountant, drove her to the office before she could object and disappeared with the promise to come in no time, just a little peak! They still would be able to make the trip, he assured Elvira and left her to wait for him. For a man in a hurry he acted strangely after that - went to buy a cake and lemonade, then admired every minute detail of the excellent floor job with the beaming Mrs. Hlebarova. While eating a slab of rich chocolate and walnuts concoction in her old-fashioned sitting room Tanas heard more praise about his grandparents than he had heard in the last fifteen years. He called the office to be sure that Elvira would wait and spent the afternoon with her driving around few abandoned construction projects, opening locked doors and climbing mountains

of broken bricks, forgotten bags of already solidified cement and other garbage. He drove the totally exhausted accountant back to the office around four-fifteen, and the banks closed at five, right at the time Vasko delivered her to her home.

The dispatchers were getting used to see Tanas in his office by six-thirty in the morning. He had implemented several changes to the shifts, broken some well established clusters within the team and fired four people. One mutinous voice had insisted on the fact that his dad would not have shuffled people like that and the number of fired had risen to five. The dispatchers discovered that Tanas had a phenomenal memory for figures and could quote kilometers to places and compare them to the actual mileage of the cars. That had lead to sudden drop in the fuel charges for most of the cars. The story about Binka being sent home to dress spread like a wildfire the same day. She had arrived on Tuesday morning and the people were amazed how different she was looking. When she got a premium for that on the spot, on Wednesday morning the shift came in pressed shirts. Their efforts were rewarded with an invitation for the entire team who would not be on duty on Friday night to commemorate their dead boss with a dinner. The guys were quick learners - by Thursday morning there was not a single polo shirt to be seen despite the hot weather. Yet Tanas knew that those were baby steps in the right direction, the place needed an overhaul and the people did not trust him. Feared, yes, trusted, no. The money had helped to grease the situation, but if there was anything fishy in the next payroll, all the efforts would go like water in sand. It was time to get Maria back.

Valkuda stretched her stiff body. There were certain advantages to live above one's office, but it made it too easy to slip there in the early morning hours and to forget the time. Tanas' call had interrupted her balance and she felt grateful for it. A change of pace refreshed her. The young woman called Sofia office to ask Stoyan to fetch Maria and her husband and return them to Varna for the following morning. That meant that her future brother-in-law was about to pounce on his accountant. Interesting. Dimitar had ambled in her office in the middle of Tanas' call and had invited him to discuss the company's transfer documents the same evening. May be he would shed more light on his plans. She was also curious about the agency - she had heard about the changes, blue nails included, and was glad he had taken her advice to fire the worst.

Rumors were that he had been spending the evenings and early morning hours there, then stuck with the accountant like welded together. She had not have chance to get to the bank yet and the hell had not broken loose. Friday was the designated day. She hoped Maria would look better than the previous Friday.

The damn car would not start, just would not, Elvira was seething. It was a pretty new Opel and up to that moment she had not had any problem with the blasted thing. She has planned to split her visit to the bank in two, and had gotten in that godawful early hour to be at the branch at the opening at nine, then slip at the office by ten-something. Without a car it would be darn impossible. She called Tanas to tell him that she would take a taxi and come, but he offered her not to bother. He would send someone to pick her up and leave the office mechanic to tinker with her car. If it was a minor problem the guy would drive himself back to the office. Tanas hung before she answered him. Elvira seethed until half an hour later the rescue crew arrived. The mechanic could not see anything at first sight, so she left the keys with him and went to the office. Tanas was hip deep in some police reports and emerged a little after midday to say that the car has been towed to a garage for tests and he will be taking the accountant for lunch. Binka came and said that she was getting concerned - it was not like Maria to not call if she needed to come late, not that she would vanish for four days without a trace. 'May be we should see who lives nearby and send him to her apartment. At least we may get her husband or ask the neighbors!' she suggested.

Elvira expected that the idea would come forward sooner or later. Diversion should work for a while. 'May be it will be a good idea. May be she will explain some strange things in the books also!'

'What strange things?' Tanas was baiting as she expected.

'We may talk during lunch!' Elvira cast a side look to show that she did not want to talk in the presence of the receptionist.

"Yes, you are right! Let us go! Do we need anything from the office for that?"

'No, may be few pieces of paper and a pen, but that is it! I will go to the bathroom and I am ready whenever you are ready!'

'I will get the paper and will wait for you in the car,' Tanas turned to his office.

Binka waited for few minutes to be sure that they have left and started dialing panicky.

The bitch was good at that, one had to admit. Tanas hoped that she would take his rage as aimed at Maria, who she had bashed for the last two and a half hours. The accountant had shown a rather good memory about the "errors" which could be easily verified and attributed to assistant's sloppiness. She had sorrowfully expressed her grave concerns that it had been going on for long, she had not have time to verify most of the books, just what she had picked up here and there, but she would make a full audit, would take the books home if needed and work the weekends. Tanas expressed his appreciation of her devotion - both his own and what his father would have thought about it. At that point Elvira took him by surprise. She cried over her salad that her grave fears were too grave to be expressed aloud. Tanas consoled her that whatever would be said would remain between them. The accountant had lifted her gaze and murmured, 'They may have been in it together!'

'Who?'

'Oh, Tanas, you know how much I liked your father, but my heart tells me that it may be that he and Maria had been in stealing from the company together! There are people on the payroll that I can't remember seeing. Not that I know everyone by first name, but I know most, they come to me to sign, and I have seen names that I cannot link to faces. I feel so awful, your poor father cannot come and defend himself. We have to find Maria at least but it seems that there are money missing! I will take the books home tomorrow and will try to give you a better picture, but I feel so bad!'

Tanas was silent. He had not expected that she would get to blaming his father for the missing money so fast. That much for a lifetime they have worked together, dined together, drunk together. Elvira had known his father since before he was married to Tanas' mother; they have been together since high school. Not even forty days had passed since her partner in crime had died and she was already unloading everything on his dead shoulders. It was calculated, she had nothing to lose as she was right, the dead could not come and defend themselves. But the live ones could and she was in for a nasty surprise the following morning. He started getting the papers and put them back in the newspaper he had brought them in. Tanas looked at his own photo touching Vilena's angel.

'I hate what he did to that Vilena girl!' he seethed through clenched teeth and looked at Elvira. She was white as chalk and looked intently at Tanas. 'How do you know about Vilena? I am sure he did not talk to you about...' she caught herself.

'An old family friend enlightened me, I did not thought you knew her as well,' Tanas had seen her looking at the picture and knew that the moment had gone. She knew more about Vilena and it was not about how she had been doing at school before she died. He decided to try his luck. 'Was she such an angel as the newspapers paint her or it is the usual tabloid stuff?'

'Well, she was pretty, like any seventeen years old girl would be, of course, reasonably good at school and stuck to your father for a while. They were about to split with your father when she died, he was telling me she is too straight-forward. May be she was a puritan like her mother, pedigree and that garbage. We were pretty wild gang at that time although we did not have the same means as now, of course. We did not have cars to go to dates, but the motorcycles would do also. She was so prissy she would not ride as it was not ladylike.'

There was nothing that was extraordinary in her recount if not for the undertones, Tanas thought. The sobriety of his brain cells was having a nasty effect - it was amplifying his inherited ability to sense the feeling of the person across the table. Elvira Palikareva was jealous of Vilena more then thirty-five years after her death and it was not envy for her posthumous sudden popularity. The more she talked, the better his chances were to get another mustard seed of useful information.

'My father rode a motorcycle? I never knew about that!'

'His father would have killed him if he knew! Your grandfather was an awfully strict man even at that time, the town was scared of his name only. Tanassov in a helmet would have broken the ground rules of the Universe!'

'Well, may be at seventeen yes, but he had some chances after that, I would say,' Tanas was threading cautiously.

'You have no idea what grip your grandfather had when he sensed something that was not up to his standards! Your father had no intention to marry your mother, they were free to choose what to do, but no, he had to get it his way. Apart that you were born, they were miserable with each other.'

Tanas knew that on that account she was right, his parents had been miserable, but the mistake was theirs, they were not kids not to know what they were doing.

'Couldn't they get divorced - it was not uncommon at that time...'

'There was nothing common when it came to your grandfather! He was from the generation that believed in "forever" stuff - Third Reich was forever, communism was forever, marriages were forever! See how much good it did to him, not only the communism, but your grandmother as well. I don't say that it was not touching, but why waste two lives, he was pretty young when she fell ill. With his face and position he would have had half the town begging for his attention and don't think they were not trying! No, Tanassov had to be different! He threatened your father with despicable things if he got divorced and at the end your mother simply ran away to the other end of the world to get away from him. Your grandfather paid Emilia to get away and used his influence to settle her in Sofia. Your father was devastated, he was sure his father was doing it only to spite him. At that time your father had to take care of you and Dimitar, he would not leave you to pursue an unworthy woman who did not want to occupy herself with kids.' Elvira was going on what she was sure was a safe turf. Tanas remembered the smiling woman who had taken care of him and his brother whenever she had been allowed by two over-ambitious nannies, suspicious father-in-law and all-time-partying husband. She had sneaked him for an occasional ice-cream from the corner boot and got a severe reprimand when they were caught, he would have been around ten at that time. Few months later her smile was extinguished, like someone had flipped a switch and next time he saw her smiling was in Sofia when he was an adult, a chance encounter. She had introduced him to her fourth son, a boy a head taller than his mom, who had been with her at the moment. For a woman who did not want to bother with children, four of her own was an impressive number.

'It seemed to me that your generation always had fun when I was little! I don't remember a lot of kids around, to be honest!'

'Indeed we did. There was nothing else to do anyway - no free trade, no enterprises, no tours abroad like now. The top posts were occupied by people like your grandfather and there was no chance to go up until they die and most of them lived to be old enough, you know.' - that was also true, their generation had not much to do with their freedom, but still it was a personal choice, always a personal choice.

'I sound like an old hag, too much red wine, I think, let us get back to the office and I will start on those books, Gosh, it is almost three already!'

Tanas paid the bill and thought that he had to hold her somehow for another hour forty-five minutes. He drove back right into the traffic and for the first time in his life blessed the damn thing.

The landlord of the house which the security company rented for its directors was speechless. Not only he was met with coffee and chocolate cookies, he was ushered directly to the boss, who offered him a compensation for the damages caused to his outdated furniture, he was paid everything in full and given a deposit for the water and electricity bills. The elderly man remembered that the last two times he had gathered his courage and came to talk to the elder Tanassov, he had been thrown out without explanation and told to see a lawyer. He thanked, got the money and left as fast as his old Moskvitch would allow him. He was not the one to tempt fate.

The garage called twice that they had almost finished and until her car was brought back, Elvira was too occupied to notice the time slipped by and the bank was about to close in fifteen minutes. She checked the small silver key. Friday was the day, she would show and whack Tanas with the books, leave him to study them and go to the bank like every Friday. The two hours that she had allocated were exactly what she needed. Once she secured the money, it would be time to get into the disappearing act. Nobody had heard of Maria since last Friday which meant her money had bought her exactly what she had paid for. Freedom. Nobody now knew about the money, she was the only one. She would go to the office after she cleaned up the safe, take the books and go home to work. She laughed aloud. That would be her last day of work. Elvira looked younger than her age and that was recorded in her new passport - she should remember to clear up her own safe first, as the passport was there, together with the new passport for Tanassov. She would get rid of it later, she could not drop it in the bank garbage pail. She could start anew without reminders, thank you very much! She should start packing, not that she would need much of what she had now, but there were things she did not want to leave behind.

'Do you know the owner of the pastry shop at the corner? I thought about buying it, their cakes are really good!' Tanas handed to Valkuda the box with the dark chocolate cannon ball shaped sweet and to Dimitar the bottle of slightly acid white wine to go with it. He had come to discuss the company transfer and hoped for an early night. On Friday Elvira would open the safe and he wanted to confront her full force.

'Since when you are prepared to buy a cow to have a glass of milk?' quipped Dimitar.

'You see, with this home buying business I have been visiting them often enough to know that their shares will rise,' Tanas grinned. 'Where is the real food? It looks like we are in for few drops of rain, if it is outside better start now.'

They sat around the table at the roof terrace and started on the salads. It was hot, humid and the air smelled of storm. But it was not bothering Tanas much, it was his hosts. There was tension between the two of them, he could sense it, but did not want to go into details. May be it was normal pre-wedding jitters. Weddings were noisy affairs and his idea of 'small' might be different from Dimitar's. He decided to try a joke that had already worked with them:

'Have you decided on the wedding transport?'

Both of them jumped. Dimitar warily looked at him.

'If you start talking about dragons again...'

'Don't be ridiculous! No, I was thinking of that vacuum cleaner that I promised you at the club! I wanted to invite you to a house-warming party and you may decide to get there in style.' Tanas saw Valkuda exhaling in a soundless relief. He better read her properly this time.

'Come on, of course I will get you a proper gift if you give me some ideas or at least directions. What is the brother of the groom supposed to buy - was it the fridge or it was for the mother-in-law? Just say it, I am not good at that, I don't go often to weddings. I have nobody to consult.'

'May be out mutual stepmother?'

'Is she coming? Yeah, she needs to come to the signing or may be she would prefer to give her lawyer an authorization to sign for her.'

'Forget it, she is coming tomorrow, together with Maria, Roman and Andon Tsarev.'

'Sofia is going to be deserted, I see. Why is Tsarev coming?'

'May be because Maria refused to meet Elvira without his presence. May be he would ask you some questions about Vilena also.'

'Me?'

'You. You know that he is her brother.'

'I know, Mrs. Hlebarova told me at the cemetery. If he is upset about the photo, I will apologize although I did not intend to upset anybody.'

'Tanas, stop pretending, there is no audience around, for God's sake!' Dimitar burst.

'I do mean it, I did not go there for a photo op, damn it! What do you want, me to publish a statement in the newspaper? "I visit graves because it is appropriate and a bastard caught me on film."

'Oh, so visiting her grave seems to you appropriate?'

'Why not, she was his girlfriend, so said Mrs. Hlebarova and so said Elvira today.'

'Are you taking me for an idiot? You knew everything about her before that!'

'Yes, sure, I keep a database of father's former paramours since he was in third grade. It takes too much memory to keep tabs on his wives!'

'You are dodging the answer!'

'I am not dodging the answer, I am not getting the question!'

'You were discussing with Father to kill Valkuda the same way Vilena died.'

'But she died in an accident! Father said that it is the pensive that are the easier to get rid of, that is what he told me. I asked him and he said that Vilena was an example of a pensive person who did not look where she was going! He did not even tell me that she was dead! Who fed you all that crap?'

'Crap, you said! Without that crap as you named it, Valkuda would be dead by now! Mila overheard you the night before she fled and you confirmed it when you came to Brashlyan, you said Father would kill her and I managed to get there just on time! Crap!' Dimitar was foaming at the mouth.

Tanas sat straight. There were few missing pieces, but the picture was getting clearer.

'So the blondie was not as drunk as she pretended to be. Good for her, although she could have put some more memory to what she heard, because what I am telling you is what he told me. When I came to Brashlyan, I was not even sure if Father had Valkuda at all or he was bluffing. I could not imagine that she would fall in his hands like a pear; I know how obsessed she is with the security. So I could not have told you what he would do to her as I had no idea myself. My agreement with him was that he would wait for me to come back to decide together what to do with Valkuda. It was his idea to give you a deadline at midday, sounded good to me at that time. I have no idea why but I have absolutely no memory about what happened in Brashlyan, nor about the first two days in the hospital, how about that?! Did you whack me up with something?'

'I wish I had, but by the time I was back with her, they have packed you and sent you to the nuthouse.'

'So you managed to get from Brashlyan to Varna and back in what, twenty minutes, you say! And it is me they put in the nuthouse!' Mathematics had never failed Tanas.

Dimitar was fighting for control. It was him who was asking questions. How did Tanas turn the tables? He decided to play *va banque*.

'Yes, damn it, you are right, there was a khala and you saw it, that is true, as well as it is true that you know that Father killed Vilena and that he was preparing the same for Valkuda. I got her out of his car a minute before it slid down. He even tried to shoot me but missed and slid with the slope because there was a bomb ticking for exactly the midday deadline you said was an invention. You can ask the khala if you want. Now tell me that I am wrong!'

'The only thing I am sure is that I had no clue that Father had killed Vilena before you said so and you can take my words to the bank on that. The rest probably is true or at least I am ready to believe it...'

Tanas looked at Valkuda who was sitting pale as the tablecloth and her hands were clenched so tight that her knuckles were white.

'The diary said that it is a signet ring, not a snake...'

'It is not the same ring, Dimitar made this for me after.' The always outspoken manager was whispering.

'Do you still believe that I want to kill you?'

'N-no...' the word was a mere breath of hot air.

'What? You trust him? But you told me yourself that he has mentioned the khala to you at the ride! You are ready to trust a killer, a son of a killer, just like that? I thought more of your abilities to reason!'

'I am not a killer and you should not insult her!' Tanas was half standing.

'Or what? You will do to me what Daddy did to his Mommy after he finished with Vilena?'

'Dimitar! Stop before you do something you will regret!' Valkuda stood up.

'You stay out of this, it is between him and me!' Dimitar yelled at her, flipped the tablecloth and pulled an envelope from the table drawer. Valkuda's eyes became green pools of embarrassment.

'Don't do it!' she sunk heavily in her chair, looking at Dimitar.

The triumphant look on his brother's face was telling Tanas that it was a wasted plea. The young sculptor reached across the table and handed him the envelope.

'What is this?'

'Open it, but not on your plate, if you don't mind!' Dimitar was looking pleased with himself. He turned and poured himself a glass of the white wine that had been cooling.

Tanas cast a quick glance at Valkuda. She had hugged herself as if she were cold and there were tears in her green eyes. She had Tane's eyes, he thought oddly, and her old man had been telling him that if one had to enter a cold water, he better jump, after the initial shock it felt less cold. He winked at her in a decent imitation of her grandfather, saw her gasp and opened the envelope.

Valkuda was looking at the tall man with early gray hair. Nothing gave away what he was thinking. He closed the letter and put it in the envelope together with the silk ribbon, then handed it back to his brother.

'So?'

'That explains the presence of Andon Tsarev at Father's funeral. I hope he had found some closure...'

'You want to tell me you had no clue about it?'

'No, until you told me just before you handed me the letter. Dimitar, think again, when had Father confided in anyone? You saw my file, it was Valkuda who took it from his vault, wasn't it? Do you reasonably think that he would tell me something that he had managed to hide from the entire world?'

Dimitar blinked. That was reasonable; their father was not about heart-pouring confessions. If he had been successful in deceiving his own father and mother, there was little logic that he would tell that to Tanas. It would be dangerous if Tanas decided to start digging after Valkuda died. But then, the dear parent was prepared to get rid of Tanas in a month or two maximum. Still that gave Tanas enough time to alert someone inadvertently, because the fate of the two women would be rather similar. He was getting confused.

'I am sorry I can't help Tsarev on this. May be he would have had better chances asking around when it was still raw.'

'He did not have much time at the time, he had other fires to extinguish...'

Dimitar took a deep breath and told him about the harrowing aftermath of Vilena's death on Tsarev's family fate, about Tanas Sr.'s intervention and what Andon had told him about being grateful yet unable to press charges so he had executed his own punishment. Valkuda and Tanas were listening without making a sound.

Dimitar was relieved. By dislodging the emotions that had been bubbling like lava in his veins he felt their burden became less and he could think a little bit clearer. He looked at the somber faces around the table and let out a sigh.

'Look!' they said in unison, then stared at each other startled.

'You first!' Valkuda was faster.

'I was thinking of something. You kept saying "helped, helped" and it triggered it. Had anyone thought of how Father disposed of Vilena's body so successfully? Even if she was delicate as flower, he still had to pass the entire Varna with a dead wet body and a school bag that was found neat and dry, dump the body, arrange the scene and get back in time to wipe the bathroom and wake Grandma. There is no reasonable way for him to do that alone! Someone was with him in it, there is someone else, God knows if dead or alive, but there was someone who helped him. I cannot say "Burn this, they are all dead now!" because I have the gut feeling that we don't know everything. Valkuda?'

'Well, I was thinking along the same line - he may have killed her alone but could not get her to the beach in his pocket. It is not like one can go and ask around "Have you seen a guy dragging a dead girl around on whatever was the date she was killed?" Except if the accomplice slips something, but that should be in front of either Tsarev or one of us, which makes it highly unlikely.'

'Yeah, it is useless to cry "Cherchez la femme!" three and a half decades later, damn it!'

'Oh, My God!' Tanas clutched his head and both Dimitar and Valkuda jumped.

'I told you it is too much to drop on him!' the young woman yelled at her future husband. 'Look what you did!' Dimitar squirmed - he did not intend for Tanas to snap. His brother had been making a steady progress and they were getting along well for the first time in their lives. He did ignore Valkuda's warning that Tanas had had one too many blows in the last week and the blasted letter could wait. He wished he had listened, like he had promised his grandfather that he would listen to her. It was damn too late; Tanas' face was an inscrutable mask of rage. Where did he put that doctor's phone that was given to him in Bourgas, he might be able to get someone even at that hour! He was about to dash for it when Tanas' hand shot and nailed him to the spot.

'Sit down, you two, please sit down and listen!' Tanas schooled his features to be less menacing. He knew he was not a pretty picture when he scowled. There was no need to scare off the wits of his dinner party. Valkuda sat back while Tanas let his brother's hand and apologized, seeing him rubbing few dark pink spots.

'You have the same weightlifter grip as Val, you know! Better not fall in your hands, so to speak! I have to ...'

'I said "listen", not "talk", OK?' Tanas interrupted his rant.

'Today I was dining with Elvira who was trying to shift all her sins on Maria already. Then she started that she loved Father dearly, but suspected that he had been in conspiracy with Maria for them to rob the company together, and that she would take the books home to verify that and other crap. I had brought some papers in one of your wretched newspapers and it was me with the angel at the graveyard on top. I said that I hated what he did to that Vilena's girl, thinking of photographer. The bitch got green and asked how I knew for she was sure Father would not have talked to me, but then she got a glance of the photo and started feeding me stories about how much fun they had when they were at school. She was stark jealous of Vilena, who had been very ladylike and refused to ride motorcycle with them.'

'Father had never ridden a motorcycle in his life!' Dimitar was indignant. The bitch had been lying through her teeth.

'I thought the same, but she said quite the opposite, it had been a secret from Grandpa as he disapproved. More, when I cleared Father's closets, there was a brand new custom made biker's outfit, boots included. I was quite surprised at that time but it makes sense now.'

'How about he dreamed to be the Big Bad Biker but never acted upon it. I am pretty sure he could not ride a bike, I have never seen him on one!'

'Not seeing him does not mean he could not drive. Have you seen me biking?' Valkuda interjected.

'Or me?' Tanas was amused.

'What, you two can ride a motorcycle, get lost! How did you do that?'

"Grandpa" and "Tane" sounded simultaneously and Tanas and Valkuda stared at each other again. Dimitar did not pay much attention to it. 'And why was I left out?'

'Because you had to run and carve wood at the pier with the gypsies, but that is not the point. I am sure Elvira knows more and I need a plan how to make her talk!'

Dimitar and his fiancée looked at each other and the tiny pill in Tantche's hand floated in their minds. It was too late to get one now, even if they found a person who would be ready to sell. No, there should be another way.

'She should be pretty talkative tomorrow when she sees the safe. If you play your cards right, she may spew something.' Valkuda was sure his silver tongue would waggle it out of Elvira given the chance.

'I will need a witness, someone who does not work for me!'

'Bet you will have plenty - Maria, Roman, Mila and Andon are all coming, we can come as well, do you have big enough closet to stuff us all?'

'You are a genius, you know!'

'Thank you, I do, I have the press to prove it!'

'I was not talking about your artistic career, brother mine! I do have that storage room that never had anything stored in it as it was not convenient to bother whoever is in the conference room, so I think there are few chairs only there. I will put you all in it and do my best. You will have to keep quiet and listen. That is a plan!'

'We will fill the others when they arrive, by the way, you owe me also the price of three sleeping compartments for Sofia-Varna overnight train. May be you should consider buying the state rail company for that!'

'I will consider your kind advice about the shares. That reminds me, there is still a cake somewhere here, I will have my third now if you don't mind and a fork, please!' Tanas chuckled. Dimitar went to get the wine. Valkuda brought the cannon ball and put it in front of him. The cake nearly rolled. Tanas lifted one brow and saw that her hands were shaking.

'Don't worry,' he tried to console her, 'While there is chocolate, I will be all right.'

Instead of laughing she turned and fled.

"What did I do now?' Tanas was startled.

'Don't pay attention, it is nerves. She had been working real hard and needs a break. On top, we have been arguing like crazy to show the letter to you or not.'

'I am glad you showed it to me and told me about Tsarev. That means that the old man did not do all the work to spite me. I do feel better about it.'

'Tell her that, she had been insisting I shall let it go.'

'She should know by now that Tanassovs never let go. For example, I am not going home without eating my cake!'

'Stay here then, I better go and fetch her!'

'Good thinking, *cherche ta femme*, you said...' Tanas was talking to an empty chair.

As neither Dimitar nor Valkuda emerged in few minutes, Tanas finished his third of the cake in solitude and reluctantly packed the rest of it in the fridge. Somewhere far away a lightning cut through the sky and he looked around. There was not much to straighten and he started clearing the table, putting the rest of the food in the fridge and the dishes in the dishwasher in the kitchenette. The first drop of rain made him turn to the table and grab the letter which was still there. Few drops had fallen on the yellow envelope. One of them was dissolving the ink of the final "a" in "Margarita" like a blue-stained tear. He hastily blotted it and got inside before the downpour started in earnest.

It was a night to party, Elvira thought, to enjoy one last time the company which she had known for decades. May be she would miss them a little, but there were many places around the world that had a great selection of decent companies who knew how to enjoy themselves and would not refuse to include a wealthy widow of good looks and no ties. A change of hairstyle was in order; she should look like herself on the passport. She had to go and buy a bottle of new hair color as well. Even over the din of the restaurant she heard the siren of her Opel's alarm and run out to see what was going on. The security was there and told her that some car thieves had tried to break in her car, but it did not look like they have succeeded and they have ran away when the alarm had started. Elvira checked the doors which were locked, looked for damage and when she did not find a thing she went back. She did not care much about the car after Saturday, but she needed it for the following day. After another hour she decided to take it easy and drove home.

Few minutes after nine Binka put through a call for Tanas. A well known auto dealership was calling and the general manager was all excuses and politeness, obviously not knowing what to say.

'Mr. Tanassov, I am not sure where to start it. We received the machine that your father ordered. It is here two weeks earlier than we expected, it came with another shipping, you know. I am not quite sure whether your father intended it to be a surprise, as we promised to keep it in storage for him, but under the circumstances may be it will be better to deliver it to you right away. You see, we were so sorry to learn that he had died, he had been so excited about this order...'

'What order?' Tanas was absolutely sure that the company had not ordered new cars, at least not through that dealership.

'Why, oh, so it had been a surprise, may be a present for you, how so unfortunate that he is not here to give it to you...'

'Man, did I ask what order we are talking about?'

'Ah, sure, you don't know, how I can be so insensitive! Your father had ordered you a brand new Harley, Dyna Convertible with all the trims, special shield and custom-made bags, a special order, of course. It is already fully paid as it is customary when we commission something that expensive and rare. Beautiful machine, second to none if you permit me to say, a king of the road. You will be the envy of every Harley owner for miles around, what am I saying, in the country...'

The dealer was hyperventilating about how special the bike was and his every word was sinking Tanas slowly in his own grim thoughts. That is what he would have been traded for, a bike, its "Stone Blue" color fit for stoned blue Tanas. With the custom-made saddle bags to fit the entire contents of the safe. Father in a helmet, breaking the rules of the Universe, as Elvira had enthused the day before. Elvira! She would be in the office any moment. Damn his father's timing!

'Bring it directly to my office as soon as you like! I appreciate all your efforts. Thank you!' Tanas disconnected and stood up. He would mop later. He had a broom closet to spruce up, and fast.

The Opel trunk did not want to open and Elvira cursed the thieves who had damaged it the previous night. She dropped unceremoniously her unladylike briefcase on the front passenger seat and drove to the office. Nothing could dampen her spirit, she had the key, she had the suitcase and all would end before midday.

The accountant sauntered in her room, flipped few pages and started gathering the documents she wanted to dispose of. Not that it would matter a lot, but the more time she had the better.

'Am I not worth good morning?' Tanas teased from the entrance.

'Oh, my dear, you startled me. I did not think you would be so early. You need to take it easy, you know! I will get the documents to start the revision this weekend.'

'Aren't you going to the bank first, it is Friday?' Tanas did not like the idea of changing plans.

'Oh, my, how fast the time is flying, you are right. It is time to go there. Are you going to be here when I come or you will get an early day off? May be in this heat you really have to take care of yourself. Your father would have killed me if I don't take care of you! There is not much to be done anyway, it is slow around, everybody is on vacation... Have Maria called by any chance today?'

'No,' said Tanas absolutely honestly. It had been Valkuda who had called to tell him they are waiting for his instructions in a quiet cafe not far from the office.

'This girl, so much trouble! Well, I better not rely on the traffic!' The accountant picked up several files and headed to the door. Tanas went out of her office, waited until she locked and continued with her towards the door.

'Are you not staying here?' Elvira started to panic. If he went to the bank with her, it would be a disaster.

'Oh, yes, I will only go to the corner boot to buy the newspaper, will go back to read it and will see from there.' He walked her to her car. 'Do you want me to bring your briefcase to the office?'

'No, no, I will put my files in it! I brought it to get some files home; this is the biggest I could find that is not a suitcase!' Elvira let a nervous laugh.

'Well, good luck at the bank!' Tanas waved at her and went to the corner, bought a newspaper while she maneuvered and waved again. Then he went back to the office and started calling different phone numbers in rapid succession. Few minutes later two black cars deposited six people and left as silently as they had come.

'Binka, we do have somewhere color paper, I am sure, see in the storage room right on the top shelf behind the door!' Tanas' voice carried from his room.

The receptionist went and started shifting packages. What on Earth he needed color paper for, to print the weekly report in yellow and stick it in the bathroom, she wondered. There were few more boxes to reach, but the door was in the way. She elbowed it and the lock clicked. The young woman pulled the lowest box and there it was, a set of blue, yellow and red paper. She arranged the rest and tried to open the door. Nothing. She rattled the door knob again, but it did not bulge. Stupid door, nobody had closed it for ages, and it chose that very moment to lock itself! Good that she was not alone, Tanas may hear her if she yelled. But it was so indignant - a finely dressed, mature young woman screaming like a street vendor! Binka tried the knob to no avail. She thought that if Tanas left, Elvira may not come in the afternoon and she would spend in the closet all the time until a cleaner decided to show up, may be even on Monday morning. That was not a nice perspective, better be known as sissy. She screamed. 'Somebody get me out of here, I am locked in the closet!'

The next moment she heard:

'Don't worry, I will find a way to get you out of there, damn, who put the lock on this door the other way around!'

The door opened without a sound and Tanas was frowning at it.

'I know we never close this place, but to put the lock on the outside is a pure perversion! Is someone afraid of skeleton out the closet? Come out and put a note for someone not to get there incidentally, because it will be ages before we find him.' Tanas took the paper and locked himself in the big conference hall. Binka hoped someone had brushed the dust from there, it had not been used in years.

The seven people around the table were talking softly although the door was supposed to be soundproof.

'I am much obliged that all of you decided to come. I know that some of you have good reasons not to trust me, but I hope to turn a new leaf. I am firing Elvira today upon her return and I hope Maria will accept the accountant position. You will be provided with security as she probably had tried to eliminate you. She was the only one convinced that you are not coming back. If we are lucky, she will say so and we will be able to press charges on that account also, but I will be filing a suit on Monday regarding the discrepancies in the books. I am not sure I have enough to get her arrested today though.'

Maria was calm. The few days in the tranquility of the monastery had restored her nerves and she was ready to face the dreadful woman. She felt safe - Roman was next to her, Tsarev had offered help after the discussion that Palikareva was set to frame her. Evidently Tanas had not bought the accountant's lies and she still had a job, even a promotion. She squeezed Roman's hand.

'I don't know how much time we have. Vassil will be following her from the bank. I am pretty sure she will be showing up here as soon as she sees that the safe is empty. He will call me once she is out of the building. Then I will ask you to get into the storage room and listen. Are we going to break the law, Mr. Tsarev?'

'No, you are not intentionally recording anything without telling her, are you? It is by pure chance that we are going to be there and that we had previously agreed our conversation to be recorded and you have forgotten to switch the recorder off, pure incidents, you know...' the gray head bobbed in laughter. 'We will have plenty of time to talk later!'

Mila was staring at her elder son-in-law and was trying to reconcile the man in front of her with that Tanas who had been always drunk or on the way to being drunk or coming out of a drunken stupor. She was looking at the sheer vitality that he was exuding, the same life force that had drawn her to his father, the overpowering presence and the feeling that there was no obstacle that could impede him on the way to what he wanted. So sad that she had missed seeing that her husband had wanted a pliant body only and a decoration for his tie, temporary preferably. Tanassov had had the same snake's tongue that had charmed Eve to try the apple from the tree of knowledge and her out of a career. Not that it had been a lot, but was something that she was not that bad at. Without any experience the position of apprentice manager was much harder to get than the position of a folk singer. She sighed. It was time to decide what to do and where to go.

It was far fetched scenario that Elvira would talk about Vilena, Dimitar had insisted and they have not told neither Mila, nor Maria and Roman about the letter. Valkuda agreed that if Tanas was suspicious of his accountant, he would better talk to Andon afterwards. There had not been much time either - the late arrival of the train and the quick breakfast left few minutes to get closer to the office. They had anticipated that the

choreography of sneaking them would take less, and now everyone was covertly looking at their watches. Tanas' cell rang.

The bank was busy as usual, even busier as it was Friday and people who were traveling over weekend were coming to exchange currency, put some things in their safety boxes and get others out. Elvira did not need to wait though - one of the small managers recognized her and brought her bypassing the line which caused a sufficient grumble and few distinctly rude words. Normally Elvira would not have let it go, but she did not care at the moment to lose another second. She opened her safe first as not to drag the heavy briefcase around. Its contents were not that much, the two passports, several jewelry boxes and few stacks of cash. A thin smile spread on her face - she should not have bothered, but who knew how the fate would dump everything on her lap. She waved at the manager and followed him to the big safe. He politely waited for her to inspect it first, then used his key and Elvira used hers. She pointedly looked at him and he retreated to leave her in privacy. Elvira slowly opened the door. On the bottom of the vault a freshly minted penny shone at her.

The accountant would have screamed but she was too busy gulping for air. That was not possible, the money had gone, decades of bloody work have evaporated and left a penny instead. There was no use alerting the bank security, the safe could be opened only with the original key and she had it. Elvira felt dizzy. She grasped the cold steel of the door. Who had been here before her? Tanassov. The bastard had decided to get away with all the money and without her! But there had been no money found on him and the key had been with her up and until the day he died. Maria had gone to the bank few minutes before the news of his death had reached the office. Then she had come with the story about the missing key and all the way pretending to be an innocent little lamb. No, if she had got the money she would have been out of the town long before facing Elvira - there was nothing she would gain coming back to the office. And she was frightened; one could have seen it from the Moon without a telescope. That left only one person who had had the key and could have come and cleared the safe. Tanas. She looked at the penny through the red haze in her eyes. The bloody bastard had had her money since probably Friday when he had set the snake and her to get drunk, and gotten the dough. No, he had sent the snake to get her drunk and keep her

out of the office. She remembered the mighty hangover the next morning, which was not normal. The bastards had put something in her wine to knock her down. Like father like son, but the same way as the father had not escaped she was not going to let the son go. She had enough to counter him with. Damn she had paid unnecessary money for Maria to be taken away, she should deduct it from his part. What if he refused, a traitorous voice cautioned her. The accountant smirked. She had enough to put him to the wall without trouble. She stifled the wave of nausea and grabbed the penny, shut the vault and hurried out of the bank. An old woman patiently waiting for her turn to get to the safes looked after Elvira with concern.

'She is out with the suitcase and we are going!' Vassil yelled in his cell and peeled rubber after the Opel. Crazy cow, she just passed two streets on sheer red and Vassil had to do the same not to lose her. The car was jiggling as if the accountant was shaking while holding the wheel. Three greens, they have caught the green wave. That meant that they were driving high above the speed limit, the man knew the road without looking at the speedometer. Damn, he had to swerve to avoid the car that had veered escaping the mad woman and nearly hit him instead. Vassil could not pick his cell, he needed both hands to hold his own wheel, but they are going to cross a major artery and she had no chance but to stop there. Yes, he opened his cell and pressed the redial, then dropped it on his lap and yelled again. 'Tanas, I can't hear you, we are already at Peter's shop and she is speeding madly. I can hardly follow her. If she does not hit someone she will be in the office in around three minutes, damn, it is red again, dumb duck!', he shoved the cell aside and jumped on the brakes, missing a truck by the thickness of its paint. The Opel had crossed causing a minor fender-bender in its wake, effectively blocking the crossroad.

The last turn onto the parking lot cost her a mirror but she did not care. Elvira was seeing red when she grabbed her briefcase and stomped through the reception like she was trying to get away from Pamplona bulls.

'Where is he?' she roared at the startled Binka.

'Who?'

'Idiot! Tanas of course, where is Tanas?'

'In the conference hall' Binka jumped out of the way. She had never seen the sarcastic Palikareva losing her cool. The accountant looked like she had run from the bank to the office.

'A penny for your thoughts?' Tanas was standing at the other end of the big empty room. The bastard had the tenacity to smile at her.

'Don't play silly games, little one, or you will bloody pay for it! Where is the money?'

'Good question, I have been going through some accounting before Maria had been here, but you were. Dare to explain?'

'I have nothing to explain to you, that is between me and your father and you better stay out of it. Get me my money back!'

'Your money? And since when helping an embezzler makes you entitled to money?'

'Embezzler? He was not good enough for that even! If it was left up to him there would not be a hundredth in that safe! I devised it, I made it possible, I calculated it, I packed it, I did all the work, so the money is mine!'

'What a charming idea! How did I not get that before? You see, I have already paid back to the guys you cheated. As you know perfectly well, we are going out tonight to celebrate Father's achievements. May be it will be nice to come and explain to them that it was your money and you want it back. I am sure they will be very, very understanding as well...' Tanas' voice was a pure drool.

'You fool, you utter fool, how did you dare touch it?! You did nothing for this money, you think it was the company that was so profitable, right? Wake up and smell the roses! This fitly place cannot make that much! It took years to put them aside, why do you think we have been running that stupid newspaper!'

'Ah, I had no idea that this "we" that is running the newspaper includes you. Father had forgotten to mention it somehow. You are not on the board of directors, by the way.'

'Who cares about a bunch of idiots who think they know something about journalism, who cares for the fucking journalism, except may be you when you pose for the Sunday editions?' Elvira saw the vein throbbing at his temple and decided she had hit gold. She threw the penny at him.

'The mourning son and grandson, my ass, you put more in the bloody safe than they gave about you! You are sick as your grandmother! I have been fulfilling your prescriptions all over town for you not to be caught that you cannot live without your pills. Oh, how your father despised you! He hated you the sissies, since

that little bitch that latched at him when we were at school. He would have laughed his guts out looking at that pathetic photo of you touching her stone flowers. It is good he managed to get rid of her when an opportunity came. Of course, he could not do it without me even then. Oh, well, she was cold when I came, but then your grandmother came and he could not finish what he started. You know what he did - he called me to save his bloody skin! He knew that if your grandma would get up to find the little bitch in the bathroom, he was dead. Your grandfather would have killed him on the spot. You know that "mercy" is not the word that your grandfather knew what it meant. So I did the work again!

'You are lying. Vilena died in an accident!' Tanas was looking triumphant but she intended to wipe that smirk.

'Did she? If you want to know, she died in the bathtub of your grandparents' flat. She had told him she was pregnant and he freaked and hit her, she fell and hit her head. He panicked and decided to make it look like she drowned. Very smart, typical your father! She drowned in her school uniform in the bathroom, went to have a sip of water perhaps! And she had tied her hands behind her back to do what?'

'I told you, you are lying, you could not have dragged a dead body across the town, so you may shut up!'

'I am not going to shut up until I am finished with you oaf! Of course we did it, ha, it was her first and last motorcycle ride. She even wore helmet, not that she needed it much, but it was a new helmet with a visor and her face was covered. We sandwiched, he drove, she was in the middle and I was holding to him around her. It was easier than we expected, really, we stashed her hands in his pockets, I put my legs around her feet, backpacks on the side, who would think of something other than a good friend giving us a piggyback ride from school! We had to wait few minutes for the coast to clear up as we stopped somewhat aside, he carried her and dropped her over. If he had not got brains, he had strength. I dropped him in front of his home and left. He had to play a devastated boyfriend to be sure that we will come dry out of the water. And, yes, he was riding my father's bike!'

'You have just invented it because you know how she died from the newspapers!'

'I have not! See, if you go and ask for the archives to be opened, you will find there my testimony. I confirmed that she had been subdued and wanted to go somewhere to think alone. This is not in the newspapers! And in fact, if you don't get me the money by tonight, I am going to the police with that!'

"With what? That you helped my dead father kill a girl thirty-five years ago? He is dead, if you have not noticed!"

'I did not say that I will tell them about my part! I will tell them that I know it from you!'

'Nice try, but it will not work anyway; he is dead as I said.'

'You knew and did not tell the cops, how is that? They would not let a crazy liar run a security company!'

'You have to prove that I am crazy and that I knew, so that is a long run...!' He was laughing in her face! She had trouble focusing at him through the rage that was blurring her vision but it was not the time to admire his masculine beauty anyway!

'That may be the long run, but Maria is not!'

'What does Maria have to do with you and my father killing someone three decades ago?'

'No, not thirty years ago, little one, last week only!'

'Listen, you are not making sense and I think this is a waste of time. Get out of here!' Tanas did not move though. She had him on that, Elvira was sure. Her head was splitting but she was almost done. She dropped in a chair as her legs suddenly stopped supporting her.

'Why, I can wait for the cops here. I will tell them the truth - you made me hire your father's henchmen to get rid of her, as you, your father and she had been in embezzling the company together. After your dad died, you became greedy and decided to get rid of her. It probably stenches enough around her place already. You ordered it to be like a domestic dispute and both she and that pathetic husband of hers are rotting since Sunday. Today I got a whiff that you wanted me dead also so I wanted to run, but thought over and decided to turn you in. You have all the reasons to kill her, her husband is just a collateral damage. I can be very convincing, you know!' The accountant was massaging her fingers that had got numb of clutching her briefcase. She put it squarely on the table.

'There is the deal! You still have time to go to the bank and bring me what is left of the money. Whatever you paid I will consider your part, as you have been stupid enough to spend it already.'

'Hmm, let me think about it - you will get the money and go? What is supposed to be there for me?' Tanas was looking at her very intently.

"I got you by the balls, little one!" Elvira smirked inwardly. 'You walk free. The cops may be suspicious but will not be able to trace it to you and without proof you will be enjoying the sky without bars. You got a taste

of it in that hospital of yours, I think. I will be too occupied having good time to bother about you, rest assured!’

‘So you are not going to keep me on a short leash, you say? Not even on a silk one like this?’

Tanas was dangling something in his hand. Elvira strained her eyes and screamed. She remembered that belt pretty well. The last time she had seen it, Vilena’s hands had been tied with it. He could not have known, there was no way that belt had ended up with him! Tanassov had sworn that his father had thrown away the blasted peignoir and she trusted him. But if Tanas had the belt, someone had spoken. There was someone who knew what had happened besides her and Tanassov. Had the bastard left his son the evidence against her? There was nobody else, it had been so long ago.

‘Where did you get that from?’ she croaked. Her voice was hardly recognizable.

‘I was given a letter with the exact description of Vilena’s death plus the evidence, as you see. I knew you have a good memory and would recognize it. Do you want to feel it in your hands again?’ he was about to come her way.

‘Stay there, don’t come near or I will scream!’

‘If you have not noticed it, you already are. But the door is soundproof, rest assured!’ Tanas made a step aside from the table.

A wave of pure panic washed over Elvira. She was alone with him and she had put all her cards on the table. Sure Binka had seen her entering, but that monster could kill her and keep her body in the room until the stupid girl goes to lunch and then drive her in her own car somewhere. She remembered the abandoned construction sites that they have toured the day before. That was it, he was looking for a place to put her body, they would not find her in a million of years. Elvira remembered how a year before Tanassov had shown her a slab she thought was a block that was left over from a construction site entrance barrier. He had called it candy wrapper as one may put whatever he wanted to be there securely and forever. She would fit in only half of it. Her only chance was to run and then think again and may be forget the bloody money and run, as Tanassovs were not an easy lot and this one in particular was as menacing as his father and grandfather together. The father was not much to talk about it, but the grandfather could raise the dead if he needed.

‘Maria, come here, please!’

Elvira had trouble getting what he was talking about, she had told him Maria was dead, and so she was, damn it, she had paid for it. The accountant's eyes were about to jump out of their sockets when her assistant strolled out of the storage room and came forward. Palikareva opened her mouth but no sound came out.

'Shall I call Roman also?' the phantom asked with the voice of live Maria and Tanas ordered her to do so. He could talk to the dead, that was what he was doing at the cemetery, Elvira was trembling. He had talked to Vilena and she had given him the band. All these years she had hidden it in the bouquet of the stone angel that they put to keep her there under. The closet opened again and Roman came out, she had seen him several times when he had come to pick up Maria and was sure it was him. He looked well for a dead person, except some waxy paleness. They were all staring at her and smiling viciously. She was not sure even whether she had been talking to the live Tanas, maybe it was his grandfather; everyone knew he was a master of deception and interrogation. Elvira wanted to stand up and run, but her hand could not grasp the briefcase and it was all that was left for her after a life of lies, she could not let it go. She hoped that Tanassov was going to show up and save her, if those could stand up from the dead, it should not be so hard for him to do it. May be he had found her old motorcycle and would roar in and grab her and go! She prayed for the door to open and Tanassov to show up in that leather that he had ordered recently and a helmet like then.

The door opened and a man in leader burst in pushing shiny motorcycle. Behind him the livid Binka was waving like a windmill. Tanas looked lethal - he had completely forgotten that the motorcycle was to be delivered some time during the day, but could the blasted man leave it at the garage instead of dragging it in his conference room, of all places and all times!

'I told you the boss said "To his office!" and I am not leaving a thirty grand bike outside!' the man's voice was muffled as he was trying to get rid of his helmet. His attempt was further impeded by Elvira, who sprang and threw herself at him, clutching his arms.

'Tanassov, you have to take me out of here, now, please!' the accountant sobbed under the glares of everyone in the room. Valkuda, Dimitar and Andon had come out to see what the commotion was about.

'I am not getting it out of here, didn't you get it?' The man in beaten leather suit had not heard properly. He thought that the secretary was trying to make him get the bike out. "And let go of me!"

'But I need a ride!' the accountant wailed.

'Get real, woman, you are not touching this bike, it costs a fortune!' he was trying to shake her as he still had not had the chance to take off his helmet.

'But you promised we will ride it together, I have your passport in the bag!' Elvira was sliding over him.

The man finally got rid of his helmet and looked at her. 'Who is this?' he looked confused.

The accountant tugged on his belt and tried to stand up. He jerked back, but she was holding with dead determination. 'We are going for a ride, the two of us as we planned!'

'Listen lady, get your hands off me now!' The biker was trying to pry her from his attire. It was not easy.

'All my life, you promised and promised and promised...' the words were turning into a slur and Tanas got it first. Elvira was having a stroke, an honest to goodness stroke. No matter how much he despised her, she needed help. He stepped forward.

'Binka, call an ambulance! Tell them to hurry, Mrs. Palikareva seems to be suffering a stroke! Hurry!'

'Get this mad witch away from me, will you!' the biker yelled, keeping Elvira at an arm distance.

Maria and Tanas tried to approach but were met by hysterical screams. Andon Tsarev evaluated the situation and waited till she was with her back to him. He grasped her hands from behind and held her tight, while the completely confused biker jumped aside. Elvira turned her head to look at Andon. He licked the drop of blood where he had broken his lip while the monster had been relishing his sister's final day and smiled unpleasantly.

'May be I can accompany you in this ride instead of my sister, I don't mind sandwiching. Tanassov, get this bike running! She will be in the middle!'

For the first time in her life Elvira Palikareva blacked out. It was also her last.

The sublime irony was that despite the massive haemorrhagic stroke, the accountant might have lived if they had indeed transported her to the hospital in that fashion. Her death was her own doing to some extent. The ambulance arrived late as it had to make a lengthy detour due to the closed crossroad where two of the most stubborn participants in the fender-bender had insisted on police at the scene and the place was

closed for another hour. By the time the crew reached back the hospital under glaring red lights and screaming siren, Elvira's brain had drowned in blood and the doctor's efforts were to no avail. They took her off life support at three p.m. and an hour later Tanas arrived to the company party with the announcement that they need to commemorate two close friends who had been with the company since its establishment. The men spilled few drops of their drinks in their plates or ashtrays for both of them.

All he wanted to do was get to bed and sleep. Tanas walked from the restaurant where his people had finished the dinner to his brother's house in a vain attempt to get some change of pace and shed some of the day's nerves. He had notified Elvira's family, saw that Maria and Roman would be sheltered by a friend for the night, attended the dinner. Thank God, Tsarev had taken upon him to deal with the cops who had been called immediately to cease the accountant's briefcase and to be told the story. The cops however took seriously the unsuccessful plot to kill Maria and started investigation of who had tricked Elvira into thinking that the job was done. Coupled with the two fake passports that were in her briefcase and her confession of organizing the embezzlement, it would be enough to keep her behind bars as soon as the accountant recovered, the prosecutor from the economic crimes unit had assured the lawyer. That had been before the hospital had called that she would be facing quite different judgment. Pulling some strings by everyone involved had led to the consensus that as both criminals had died, there was no need to feed the tabloids' frenzy with the morbid details of Vilena Tsareva's demise. Tanas thought that he had to bring another bunch of flowers to Margarita's grave - Elvira's death did reflect her life. The opera's reference made him think of Mrs. Hlebarova and his new place. His present landlord had been nice to let him stay few days into August as he was planning a renovation but Tanas earnestly wanted to finish the move on the weekend. He had not got time to look for furniture and he wanted at least a bed and a wardrobe. His stuff had been packed since Tuesday except for few changes of clothes and he had planned to go and start moving that evening. Tanas' car was packed and left at Dimitar's office so after the quick stop to meet his stepmother and Tsarev he could go and drop the first batch at home. That idea pepped his stride and he nearly missed the little pastry shop. He decided on petits fours as bringing a cake would be considered rather festive under the circumstances. Tanas cleared the chocolate section but added some vanilla stuff

with some vague hopes. The more people liked vanilla the more chocolate petits fours would be available. That improved his mood further and he took the stairs to the top floor two at a time.

'Come on, there would be nobody else there tonight. It will be a piece of cake... Tomorrow will be too late, there will be all sort of people strolling around. It is Friday, nobody will pay attention to another car parked for a while, it is dark there! Few minutes to get what we need and we are out of it,' the voice was convincing in the lilac darkness.

'And if he shows up?'

'He won't, he has better places to spend the night. And younger company...' the first voice snickered.

'I have a bad feeling about it!'

'Stop playing Han Solo, for fuck sake, you should have grown out of it by now! How many times you have said that you have a bad feeling, did not come and nothing happened. Else I am going without you!'

'Not so fast! We are partners in it, you remember! Go ahead, drive!' the second voice was not that sure he wanted to do it but he was a team player.

The company had only started and he was handed a full plate of entrees to munch while Dimitar was relating a complicated story about a church restoration that his mentor was working on. The food was good in that house, Tanas noted and bit into a roll. He glanced at his stepmother. Mila looked much younger than he remembered. Gone were the red talons, the high hairdo reeking of styling potions and waxes, the crass earrings, the heavy makeup and the oriental perfume. In front of him the young woman clad in white chemisette and black trousers smelled of soap and her dark blond hair was tamed in a simple braid. The last Mrs. Tanassova looked like a lost child although she was not much younger than Valkuda. He turned to her.

'Mila!'

The young woman was startled and instinctively pulled further. He understood but it stung anyway.

'I found your diploma in the company's safe. I will bring it to you next time we meet.'

'Thank you, but it is late anyway.'

'For what?'

'I cannot enroll anywhere this year; I will have to wait for the next summer.'

'What do you plan to do until then?' Tanas winced. What plans, her word had turned upside down the same time as his and she was reeling too.

'I will find something...'. The answer was not exactly informative, but Mila had nothing better at the moment. She was reasonably intelligent to know that few places had not heard about her and her skills, and even fewer might consider hiring her in earnest. She had already received several offers but they were outright unsuitable. People wanted to cash on her surname and the scandal around it. Valkuda and Dimitar had offered a job also. It was charity and she had asked for time to think about it. Mila looked at her wedding ring that had been transferred to its "widow" position. She wished it would be that easy to make the other transitions.

'How about coming back to Varna?' asked Tanas.

She had thought about it. There was no way she would hide in Sofia forever, she loved the seaside town and sooner or later would come back. Despite the cosmopolitan flair, Varna was essentially small town. That meant that the rumors would flare, but they would flare anyway. May be it was reasonable to face the music once only. Valkuda had sworn that Tanas was not dangerous while sober and nobody had seen him drinking since, may be because of a lack of time. She was not afraid anymore - after spending two nights with Lily she had heard stories compared to which her one was a breeze in the sea. Varna was a tourist city, every next day there was some other excitement to keep the people off her back. Summer was halfway through but Mila loved the long mild autumn and did not want to spend it in the normally drizzly Sofia.

'Let settle the transfer first...' she was trying to buy herself some time.

'How about we settle both? You know that Father had transferred the entire company to himself, so you, Dimitar and I own a third each. Dimitar does not want his share, we discussed it already, neither does he want money for it. What would you think if he splits his part between you and me?'

'But I thought you wanted it all! I am ready to transfer to you mine as well! What would I do with half of your company?'

'Manage it.'

'WHAT?' That made the other three interrupt their conversation and turn to them. Mila coughed.

'It is not what you think. Tanas offered me a fifty-fifty partnership in the security agency.'

'So what is that bad about it?' there was that speculative note in Tsarev's voice.

'But he said I will also manage it!'

'With a risk of being repetitive, what is so bad about that also? You said you wanted to start anew and if you trust him enough to be in the same room with him, why not to be in the same company with him? You will have as much control as he does, so he cannot cheat you out of the profits, and Valkuda assured me that the company has a good chance to keep afloat. I know I advised you to transfer it to him, but I have changed my mind since.'

'You did?' Mila nervously tugged at her braid.

The elderly lawyer shifted. It had not been often that he had changed his opinion of people and even less often when he had done it so fast. But in the morning, looking at Tanas through the crack of that closet door, he had seen another man from what he had been accustomed to in his office. He had seen the controversial, merciless and cunning man who had been his guarding demon in his early career. He had seen Tanas Sr. with his flaws and his advantages, the man who had tried to compensate for what his son had done to Tsarev as he could not have it reversed. Tanas Jr. did not need to prod Elvira for the details of Vilena's death. "What is Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he would weep for her?" Yet he had gone to his sister's grave when he had not known she had been his father's victim and he had done his best to get the truth for Tsarev. Tanas had stood up while Palikareva had thrown his father's cruel incompetence in his face; he had found the whip to make her go that extra mile when he could have silenced the filthy mouth. He had done it for Tsarev, certain that it was the last chance to find out what had happened to his sister. There had been nothing for Tanas in the maelstrom except pain but he had gone into it for a man who had despised him all his adult life. Would Tanas Sr. have done that for him? He had wielded his influence and power to help but he had not need to hurt for Andon. His grandson had not had the influence or power, but he had had the guts to feel his pain and make it his own. It took a lot from a man to swallow what Tanas had on his plate for the last two weeks and a lesser man would have cracked long ago. He had not and that reminded Tsarev again of Tanas Sr. and the bottomless pit of his ability to adapt, to accept the blows that the Fate's boxing gloves delivered and never to look groggy. But looking and being were different things and Andon was worried that Tanas would snap - not over a grand problem, but over a pebble, a word, a gesture, a minuscule event that nobody would notice. Whether anyone would be there to witness it and offer help,

whether it would be when he would be alone and defenseless, it was a question of chance like the morning encounter. Tsarev hoped against hope that the Fate would be kinder to Tanas than she had been to his grandfather and would send him someone to be there. In the meantime the lawyer was determined to try and push the balance in his favor.

Mila thought it over for few minutes but the reassurance from Valkuda and Tsarev was eroding her determination to cut all ties with Tanassovs. She had to accept that she had been the last Tanassova and act as one, it was the payment for few months of folly. In the agonizing minutes in the company closet she had learned about the man who had been her husband more than she had learned during her entire married life. The enchanting man who had smitten her had been a monster through and through. It was not his fault alone that she had not got it earlier - it took two to tango and she should have seen under the gloss, listen under the clinking of glass and gold chains. She was his widow and had to bear the cross of it. If Shakespeare was right that "bearing those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of" would make her a coward, she would better be known as a coward who at least tried.

The party broke early. Mila accepted Valkuda's hospitality and Tanas offered Tsarev a ride to his nearby home. He excused himself for the delay needed to clear up the front seat and told Tsarev about his recent purchase.

'I know Siran Hlebarova; she worked at the Music School with Margarita and my mother. A sweet woman, not one bad bone in her body. One of those few who did not desert my parents when the hell broke lose. She paid for it, of course. The snakes at the Music School made it bitter experience to stick with the ones doomed to go. Uncle Matey had to kick few asses for them to keep their hands off her. They could not touch him, he had too many friends in the right places, your grandfather included, but she left the school when my mom left. See how small the world is.'

Tanas started the car and they drove the few minutes in silence, each in his own thoughts. The car glided in front of Tsarev's building.

'How do you know where I live in Varna?' the lawyer put his hand on the door handle.

'I am in the security business, you know. And I am sorry for the mess in April. I would like to pay for the clean-up.'

'You did today. The bill is settled and the account is closed. We both can start anew,' Tsarev offered him his hand and felt the firm shake of Tanas Sr. The lawyer grinned, 'I would not want to get into your hands, literally speaking; you can crack a nut without a hammer. Good night!'

A beaten "Lada" was blocking his way to the parking space next to the house but he was only going to dump the luggage and go. Getting a tow truck would take time and he would not use the parking anyway. Tanas got two bags and fished for his home keys. The house was dark at the front, however Mrs. Hlebarova's bedroom was at the back and he tiptoed in the entry. He was about to open the door leading to his part when a voice carried from the old lady's kitchen.

'Throw a glass of water at her; she is pretending to have fainted! I don't intend to spend the night rummaging drawers!'

'But she told you she put the money at the bank!' the second voice was younger.

'Grannies don't trust banks. The dough is here somewhere, I can sense it!'

That was not a soap opera, Tanas thought, trying to make as less noise as possible as the kitchen door was cracked open. He should not have bothered - there was a splash and the older voice yelled, 'Where did you put them, old hag?'

Left first, right up the chin with the distinctive noise of cracking bone, knee at the sagging solar plexus, good, that one would not be useful for a while, Tanas threw him aside. The other was frantically opening the drawers in search of a weapon. The moment he got hold of Mrs. Hlebarova's favourite meat carver, Tane's present nailed his left hand to the drawer he was trying to push closed. The man screamed and dropped the carver which clattered on the floor. Tanas came closer, kicked the knife and with a single blow broke the man's nose, promptly pressing the clean kitchen towel to it.

'Hold on to the drawer, because noses heal easier than broken jaws and I am good at both!' the young man said almost fatherly. He turned to see the drenched Mrs. Hlebarova who had been tied to one of the massive kitchen chairs. She was not wounded as much as Tanas could see but the shock may prove too much for her. The old woman however managed to whisper, 'I am good, call the cops!'

Tanas flipped his cell and several minutes later an entire squad was running into the brightly lit kitchen. Solved attempted double murder was looking good on the report and they were assured that the two attackers were in no state to re-offend any time soon. The fair condition of the two robbers was explained by their pitiful efforts to refuse the polite request by Tanas to leave his neighbor in peace. Neither of them could speak much so they nodded and not very vigorously at that. Although shaken and wet, Mrs. Hlebarova bobbed her white curls and refused to be brought to the hospital for treatment for shock. She had full confidence that should she need anything her neighbor would provide the necessary aid. The cops did not press; they had to escort two ambulances. They took the massive carver as an evidence of how serious the double murder attempt had been - it was an impressive albeit worn blade, sharp as razor. They also towed the Lada away - it was an evidence of a premeditated crime as it should have served as an escape vehicle. The cops were content - the evening had started on a good note, should Tanas be few minutes late, their luck might have been scarce. The summer nights in a coastal town were long.

The elderly woman had drunk her valeriana drops - Tanas did not know they still could be found in the pharmacies - and it seemed enough to get the paleness out of her face. However the shock had been a mighty one and she was his grandmother's age.

'Are you sure you would not like me to drive you to the hospital for a check?'

'No, Tanas, thank you, but I hate hospitals, I spent months in them with Matey. If I can stay away from them, I feel better.'

'Would you like me to drive you somewhere else, to a relative, or a friend? It is not a trouble at all.'

'No, it is late and I don't want to trouble anyone. There are not that many people who remember an old teacher anyway...'

'You will be surprised, just tonight I talked with one who does - Andon Tsarev sends you best regards!' It was not much of a lie, Tsarev had remembered her.

'Dontcho remembers me, how very nice of him, but he had always been a nice man, such a great family and such a tragedy! He could have been your uncle if not for the accident with Vilenka!' the old woman wiped her tears. 'I can't tell you how happy his parents were when you were born, as if you have been their own grandson, Dontcho did not have children yet at that time!'

Mrs. Hlebarova went on and on about the couple that could have been his other set of grandparents, evidently loving, caring people, far from his mother's parents who had cut most of the contacts with their daughter after her untimely pregnancy. They had not despised the position of Tanassov-in-laws though. After his mother's flight they had not expressed any interest in their two grandsons, sending a faceless gift for the birthdays of the two boys and a card for Christmas. Tanas remembered that he had received the same fairytale book in two consecutive years and the inscription on the front page was in the handwriting of his grandfather's secretary. He rubbed his graying temples and sighed.

God, she was insensitive, Siran thought, seeing his ashen face. He had been through much and even saved her life few minutes ago and instead of being grateful, she had been tormenting him with the tales of times bygone. He needed sleep, he had to work for two now that his father had gone, and he had to move in, lot of work again.

"Look, I had not seen how the time passed! I am usually in bed by now!"

'I will be quick, I will just drop few more bags and go, but I will be quiet...'

Tanas started and then saw the stark fear on Mrs. Hlebarova's face. She was afraid to stay alone. Nice, he would have to sleep on the bare floor; hopefully he had put the bag with the blankets in the car.

'I will sleep upstairs, it is OK!' he hurried to reassure her.

'But you don't have bed there; you cannot sleep on the boards! No, that is not good. You can stay at the guest room, there are two beds there and I don't snore or I don't know about it! I will go prepare it, you get those bags of yours! Do you like small or big pillow? No problem, I will put both for you to choose!' the old woman was at the door.

He had no strength left to argue. Any pillow would do, and the floor also, as soon as possible. And he had to re-park the car in the driveway; the street was a no-parking zone. He stood up.

Emilia was making French toasts with cinnamon sugar, nobody else could make them. He had to get up if not Dimitar would get his share also. Tanas opened his eyes and slowly the reality focused in front of him. He was in one of the short beds of Mrs. Hlebarova's guest room and the sun was up. He glanced at his watch - eight-thirty, he had not slept that late in days! The long sleep had erased the grime of the previous day and he felt better if not for some sore knuckles and his sore neck. The people before were shorter, he

mused when he stood up in front of the bathroom mirror and half his face was out of the frame. He went to the kitchen to thank for the hospitality and excuse his unshaven appearance as he had not anticipated spending the night away from home. Mrs. Hlebarova waved away his excuses, immediately seated him at the table and propped in front of him a tower of cinnamon toasts. Poor woman was still under shock, Tanas thought, looking at the towering pile of delicious golden slices. The old lady was circling around with two different jams, honey, feta cheese and a jug of milk. May be the only thing that stopped her from wrapping a kitchen towel around his neck was the fact that Tanas had used the one hanging the night before to prevent blood from marring the floor.

'A good breakfast is a good start for the day and I am so glad to be able to see another one grace to you, now eat! And drink your milk, it is good for you!'

It had been a long time since she had guests for breakfast, as the amount should be enough for at least three people, thought the tall man and dived gratefully. While wolfing down the pieces he learned that the day would be hot, there would be a thunderstorm in the evening, the cops had called to say they have found the two guys had been involved in other crimes and wanted to thank Tanas for catching them, and that she hoped he would not mind but she would call all her friends to tell them to be vigilant as they might not be so lucky to have someone to save their old necks. Tanas rubbed his own which was still stiff from the small bed and said he had not done anything unusual.

The old woman clapped her hands, 'Saving one's life is nothing unusual? You are so humble! But what is wrong with your neck, did you injure it yesterday?'

'No, I think I have to be very careful with the choice of bed today, as I am tall and need to curl in a shorter bed. No, no complains, but today I am going to hunt for a real big bed and if I am lucky, a wardrobe with it and I will be moving by tonight.'

'Oh, my, I did not think of that, Matey was a little taller than me. I remember he joked that Tanas had to made his bedroom set by custom order. He even gave him the address as another friend had faced the same problem before him. You know, when we were young, there were not that many furniture stores and one had to know the good carpenters to place order and be sure it would be made properly. It is lost now, but the stuff that was done will hold for another generation or two. Our bedroom has not had one nail since we got it what nearly sixty years ago. But you will want something modern, I think.'

'Not necessarily, I will get the first big bed I find. Grandpa moved his bedroom set to Sofia when he moved there, it is really a fine craftsmanship,' Tanas was aghast to see that there were only two toasts left from the Tower of Pizza in the plate. 'I am sorry; I think I ate your breakfast also!'

'No, no, no, I had mine before you, this is yours. So you like your grandfather's set...'

Tanas should have heard the warning bells in Siran's voice, but he was busy swallowing the last two golden pieces. He assured the old woman that he would go home and change, get some stuff and come to pick her up to go to the cemetery. He earnestly wanted to put some flowers for Margarita. In his hurry he missed the scheming lights in her neighbour's fading eyes also.