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Who Murdered Chaika?

Excerpts

Chapter One

Vato guessed as soon as he entered that he had ended up in a bad house. Yes, a woman had been killed here, like in many other flats in which people had been murdered, but still... He felt that there was something especially unpleasant about the place.

I should have listened to Nato, he thought to himself. *They wouldn't have been able to reach me in Turkey...*

The flat had no entrance hall: the front door opened straight into a long, low room. Vato had been told that they had found the door unlocked, but he noticed that the lock itself wasn't even a proper one. Anyone could have unlocked the door with nothing more than a small blade.

There was a bookcase, old and run-down, with rows of books behind glass. One of the legs at the front was missing, and books had been stacked underneath to replace it. Vato crouched down, squinted to read and saw that one of them was by Lion Feuchtwanger.

A round table stood in the middle of the room. It had a white tablecloth, and bore a vase with some fruits and other small things in it.

All this later, thought Vakhtang as soon as he came in.

A clock was ticking. It was an old, cheap one, with a pendulum. The face of a cat moved its eyes as it kept the time: tik, tok. A metal fire-cone was missing, and had been replaced with an old padlock.

The sunlight that shone into the room was split by two metal bars in the windows. 'The child must have looked from there,' Vato thought. It was already getting quite hot, although it was still early in the morning. The windowsills held lots of potted plants. Some were blooming, and other pots were full of stuff: cutlery, paper rolls and things like that.

Later.

Next to the hall, there was a sofa of faded, with cushions and a faded book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It was an old book. Vato had had the same one when he was small, but he had never read it.

There was an armchair by the window, with laundry piled on top of it. A framed photograph hung between the windows.

He didn't want to look that way yet. To the right, by the door that led to another room, there were some men hanging around. Vato absolutely dreaded the prospect of having to go in there.

When they had left the car, Sergo had explained to him:

'She was killed with an iron. They bashed her skull in and threw the iron away nearby.'

Vato was afraid of blood, or actually of what would happen if he saw any.

I'll be sick, he thought, and indeed he began to feel nauseous.

'Here,' said Sergo, handing him an old cardboard folder. It had the word *Binder* written on it. Vato opened it and admired the beautiful writing. The first word, in particular, the title, had been written with great care:

My Will

Sergo's exaggerated facial expression made Vato feel nauseous again. Trying hard not to look to his right, he crossed the room and went into a small bedroom, where he stood next to the window and began to read.

Considering the fact that my brother, Dimitri M., is a rare bastard (do tell him from me) and that I know that he will never die of hunger or cold; and I'm not mad about his children either, who are quietly waiting for me to die and are bastards like him; and lastly the fact that a human being (in this case me, Elisabeth M.) is expected to be mortal, as one wonderful author (or whatever he was) once said, even 'unexpectedly mortal', I have set out to write my will.

As the most willing of wills will confirm, this is definitely my writing (please compare it to the many marginalia that I have left in my books) and I am perfectly sane of mind (despite all that I have had to go through), and I am indeed also perfectly sober (as a note among my papers will prove: a month before writing this, I was bitten by a dog and had to have a number of tetanus shots and some other ghastly stuff, so I couldn't drink even if I really wanted to).

Given all these circumstances, I hereby declare that, since the laws of my country grant 25% of my property to my closest but nastiest relative after my death, that I entitle (or pass on, whichever you prefer) my summer house in Nigoza to Dimitri M., my brother, whose documents you will see here, on the stipulation that the notary who will register my house and my land in my brother's name must tell him, when all these procedures are complete, the following words: 'Get stuffed, you beggar.'

The rest of my property, and everything I own, I leave to Alexander Todua, who filled my life with joy, and who really hates Nigoza, and can live without it happily ever after.

As for where and how you will bury me, I couldn't care less.

Yours truly,
Elisabed M.

This was followed by the date and the word 'Tbilisi'.

She's an idiot, thought Vato, *just what I wanted*.

'Hey! Where are you going?' Sergo suddenly shouted, along with a stream of expletives.

A young man ran into the room. Upon seeing Vato, he stopped at the head of the bed.

And here comes another idiot, thought Vato.

The young man, still almost a boy, looked like all the others at first glance, but only at the first one, and a distant one at that, until one saw him more closely.

Tall, well-built, tanned, dark-skinned, almost black in fact, his head was shaved, and he was wearing a pair of jeans, a black t-shirt and trainers. Nothing special, right?... But he had studs in his ears and rings on his fingers. His jeans were very short and very wide, and his t-shirt was obviously too small for him, as if its sleeves had been cut with a pair scissors. He wore no socks. There was no way of guessing where he came from. And all this was crowned by a big black sack with lots of things dangling from it: beads, chains, feathers... He was hugging this sack, and although Sergo was telling him to put in on the bed, he was refusing, and kept shaking his head desperately. He had big black eyes, with long eyelashes. Vato was startled at first, thinking that the boy was wearing make-up, but he wasn't!

Vato introduced himself to the boy, but he just kept looking at him and didn't say a word. He just stood there, hugging his sack and staring at Vato. His gaze was neither friendly nor hostile. It was hard to tell if he actually understood anything.

Who the fuck is he?! Vato wondered.

'Your name?'

‘Let me get out of here!’ said the boy in a low voice. ‘I beg you, please let me out of here! I’m feeling really unwell!’

‘Fine,’ said Vato, grabbing him by the arm, but the boy pulled his arm away and looked at Vato.

Vato was a bit confused. ‘Please come with me!’

Sergo couldn’t be bothered to be polite. ‘Come with us! Hey!’ he said gently, but still pushing him.

The boy folded in half suddenly and knelt next to the bed. He was still hugging his bag and this time he hid his face in it, revealing a tattoo on his head—a sun.

‘Hey!’

There was a commotion by the front door.

‘Elisabed! My darling Elichka!’ a woman screamed before weeping and wailing in a language that no one in the room could understand.

‘No entry! This is a crime scene!’ Sergo screamed.

‘Toma!’ the boy screamed all of a sudden before jumping up, pushing Sergo away from the door and running out into the living room. ‘Toma! Help me, Toma!’

‘Sandro!’ the woman screamed.

Vato raced towards them. Luckily, he didn’t have far to go.

In the middle of the room, next to the table, there was a woman, around fifty years old, big, with a huge arse and a big nose. She was also very dark-skinned, but wasn’t tanned. God had made her like that. She also wore a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt, and her grey hair was also cut very short, and incredibly she also had a big black sack by her feet.

Fuck me! It has to be some sort of sect! thought Vato.

The woman hugged Sandro and gave Vato an angry look.

‘Madam...’ began Vato.

‘Get out of here, woman!’ Sergo shouted at her.

‘What is all this bullshit? Who the hell are you?’ she launched back at Sergo without letting go of Sandro. ‘And what the hell do you mean, “go”? You go!’ This woman, Toma, had a very bad voice. Vato was startled. And she wouldn’t stop.

‘Get out of here yourselves! Can’t you see that the poor girl is dead and that the boy is crazy? Get lost!’

Then she looked at Sandro and started to wail again. ‘Poor little Elichka!’

‘Enough!’ said Vato. ‘That’s quite enough! Now let’s all be quiet and we’ll all leave, OK?’

‘OK’ said Toma all of a sudden before patting Sandro, who had his head stuck in her bosom, on the back and tenderly telling him ‘You stay right where you are, all right? I’ll walk backwards.’

And sure enough, this is how they left the room: Toma walking backwards, and Sandro hugging her without even lifting his head. Only the black sack remained by the table.

‘Madam! Your bag!’ Vato called to her.

‘Bring it here, it won’t kill you!’ a voice came from the entrance.

They finally split up by the entrance to the building. The boy trembled as he handed a pack of cigarettes to Toma. She took two, put one in his mouth and pulled out a lighter from her jeans pocket.

They started.

Sergo shrugged and went back to the flat. Vato stayed with them.

‘Have you calmed down?’ he asked the boy.

The boy nodded.

‘What happened?’

The boy shook his head.

‘What have you got in that sack?’

‘Cleaning stuff,’ Toma answered, ‘and a dressing gown.’

Vato got really annoyed.

‘I didn’t mean you! I was asking him.’

‘Oh, me? Nothing,’ whispered Sandro. He looked at the bag. ‘Actually... this is for you, Toma.’

Toma was surprised.

‘What? Why would I need it?’

‘Well, Elisabed will no longer need it, will she?’

Sergo came out of the flat again.

‘What the hell are you carrying in that big bag of yours?’ he screamed. ‘Give it to me!’

‘Here, have it!’

The boy threw the bag at Sergo. It was so big that for a second Vato thought that it would kill him, but he realized immediately that it was very light.

Sergo caught the bag and put it down. Whatever was inside it, rattled.

Chains and beads, Vato guessed, how stupid.

The bag was tied. While Sergo was opening it, Sandro looked away and smoked desperately. His hands were no longer shaking. Toma kneeled down next to Sergo.

‘Careful, understood?’ she told the policeman.

Sergo mumbled something and emptied the bag out onto the floor. Toma said a very long sentence in her incomprehensible language and Vato guessed that she hadn’t said anything nice or polite. She got up heavily.

A heap of clothes lay on the floor, colourful, glitzy, shiny. Sergo picked them up one by one and put them back into the bag. Dresses embroidered with beads, fluffy chiffon skirts, silk scarfs, satin corsets...

‘All this for me?’ asked Toma quietly. ‘What would I do with all this?’

‘Your girls might need them...’ Sandro answered.

‘Yes, they will like them... Such beautiful things...’

Toma couldn’t take her eyes off the clothes. Then she snapped out of it all of a sudden.

‘Hey! Put them back carefully! Carefully!’

‘What did you want?’ Vato asked Sandro. ‘Or what did Elisabed want? And in general, what is all this?’

‘I’ve been collecting them all year...’ Sandro stubbed out his cigarette in a box and put the box into his pocket. ‘From the second-hand shops...’ He looked at Vato and his chin began to tremble. ‘That’s what they are, rags.’

Chapter Four

Vato stretched noisily.

Basically.

There were three things that needed to be specified: Why did this woman, who had no obvious illness and lived calmly and discreetly, write her will? Why did this single (but not so good-looking) woman not have a husband? And why did she, a kindergarten teacher, know how to shoot so well?

That last question, he could have solved right there, at the table, but how could he? Magda said that Elisabed was killed, and all four red-haired children—of which three of them, or at least two, although the youngest, already knew about it, right?—began to howl and weep loudly. Vato left, without saying either goodbye or thank you.

Tomorrow, he thought, I'll ask tomorrow, or I will find out today, from this Kancha...

This Kancha was a heron-like woman, the widow of Alimbegashvili, whose child also went to the monastery. That surname, Alimbegashvili, reminded Vato of something, something from his childhood, some legend, Tbilisi folklore, streets, boys... There was definitely something, but Vato decided that trying to remember a story that happened twenty years ago would have been pointless.

Sergo reported to him, but it was a pointless report: Elisabed lived on her own, according to the neighbours. There was a commotion, lots of children, every morning, because of the kindergarten, but it didn't really bother anyone. The neighbours said that it was a good kindergarten, and that they were also invited to the children's various shows. Vato remembered Sandro's bag and the pile of glitzy clothes: 'It's for the children. I was supposed to sew some costumes for their shows...' Such a pity.

Sergo also reported that nobody had heard or seen anything that night. There were no signs of a fight in the flat. Elisabed clearly knew her murderer very well. She had turned her back towards the person and was presumably heading towards the kitchen, where two teacups had been placed on the table.

The iron. When the murder weapon is an iron... What an irony... This iron, according to Sandro, was always on the windowsill in the living room, and was used as a paperweight for the children's drawings. Why some people thought that an old iron, actually made of cast iron, was beautiful was beyond Vato. Nato also liked nonsense like that, and was thinking of decorating her new house with it. She even threatened him, saying that she would bring things to decorate the office. She presumably meant a mortar and pestle. Sheer idiocy. The only advantage, if any, was that the old-fashioned iron was very heavy. Elisabed must have died instantly. At midnight, approximately.

They couldn't find any fingerprints on the iron. The murderer had very carefully wiped it clean. Vato thought of Sandro and became suspicious: *He couldn't have cleaned anything, he thought, he's not quite there... But you never know, you never know...*

Sergo's voice, as he gave his report, was calm and monotonous. He only grew excited when he began to talk about questioning the cleaning lady, Toma.

'She really got on my nerves!' he screamed. 'I can't stand her! I spoke to her for a whole hour, and I thought of murdering that bitch at least hundred times!'

Sergo was swearing. He said that Toma was a wretch, and a bitch, and that had it been up to him, he would have kicked her out of Georgia, all the way to fucking hell, and that she was rude, and ugly, and a fucking moron.

'I can't stand her!' Sergo was yelling, and Vato, deep down, was happy, since Sergo also got on his nerves, and now Toma has beaten him! Well done, Toma!

'If you ask her,' Sergo continued angrily, 'this Elisabed was an angel. I asked her, since she was cleaning the house, if she hadn't noticed anything suspicious, and she answered that I should search for condoms and syringes in my own house! Can you believe it? I wish she had insulted me directly. I would have arrested her on the spot, that fucking bitch!'

According to Sergo, the whole flat had been left as if Elisabed had known that she was going to be murdered and had prepared everything. Everything was clean, neat and tidy, and in a drawer of the chest, along with her will and a few old letters, all the documents and papers of the house and the summer house had been beautifully arranged, receipts, telephone numbers, the lot...

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Translated by Alexander Bainbridge