



A THOUSAND STEPS

BY CHRYS ROMEO

A THOUSAND STEPS

BY CHRYS ROMEO

Copyright: Chrys Romeo 2016

Chapter 1

The vivid bunch of red petals in a flow of black lustrous hair went round and round as the swirls of her long dress would cut across the dance floor, in dazzling sharp moves that seemed to draw an invisible pattern in the air. The dancer kept the audience speechless. Her hands were rising graciously in the air, black swans drifting with the music.

Kevin watched the dancer captivated by her undeniable talent. She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful dancer he had seen up to that moment. He felt she had every chance to become the star of the pre-selections and the main attraction of the international contest ahead. He was lost in a daze, although he wasn't there to evaluate her dancing skills: he had come to investigate a series of events that had caused a suspicious unexplained accident for the dancing team before.

The team manager sat next to him.

“Good evening, detective. Do you like our dancers?”

Kevin nodded thoughtfully, while his head was actually blank like a computer on stand-by. He was too lost in the mirage of the leading dancer. Surrounded by other girls in bright colorful gowns with wavy folds, she still stood out, a black beauty with delicate gestures.

In hypnotized motion, Kevin raised his camera to take a picture. At that moment, as she was swirling round, her eyes noticed his intention. She immediately turned her back to him, drifting to the other side of the dance floor.

“Consuelo doesn’t like to have her picture taken too much”, the manager explained. “She’s a bit shy, though she’s Spanish – and Spanish girls are hardly ever bashful. But she’s very good at dancing; I’m sure she’ll make the pre-selections to the next level. However, she’s wary of too many photos.”

And the manager gave the detective a disgruntled stare.

The music stopped. The dance was over. The girls went behind the stage. Kevin stared after Consuelo absently, then he placed the camera on the wooden bench and looked at the manager, unimpressed by the Spartan beard and glaring eyes.

“Are you going to accompany the girls to the international competition?” he asked casually.

“Yes. Are you coming with us?” the Spartan-looking manager inquired sternly.”

“I think I will. I’m waiting for my colleague to join me soon. We must find out what happened the last time. Why did the bus crash?”

The manager shrugged, looking away.

“Nobody knows for sure. It might have been a technical fault, or human error, but neither was confirmed by the investigation. Aren’t you here to tell us what went wrong?”

“I intend to find out.”

The music changed to Oriental rhythm. The stage was filled by agile girls, swaying and jingling their shiny golden belts, their heads covered by colorful scarves.

“That’s Aysun in the middle”, the Spartan manager told Kevin, pointing to a beautiful girl with long brown hair and warm eyes glimmering behind the veil. “She’s the Turkish representative. She’s already been selected for the big competition. This dance is just a formality. She’s the best from her group.”

Kevin raised the camera again and the girl smiled as he took her picture. She seemed to enjoy it, and she threw off the scarf, unveiling the soft locks of chestnut brownish hair, in a charming flow. The next moment, she drifted away from the stage, disappearing mysteriously with the music.

A row of Slovenian folk dancers with flowery blouses and blonde braided hair entered marching rhythmically.

Kevin’s phone started ringing.

“Hey what’s up?” the voice at the other end seemed eager to get the news. “Where the hell are you?” she asked impatiently.

“Hey Jackie”, he answered calmly. “I’m in the dance hall, watching the pre-selections.”

“Why are you wasting time on that? We’re supposed to investigate the accident.”

“I’m also investigating.”

Kevin stood up and went to the back of the room, distancing himself from the Spartan manager, to discuss privately. His colleague was still rambling on the phone:

“How are you investigating anything? By watching the dancers? Get down here, I’ve got some files with details about the bus that went over the cliff.”

“I’ve spoken to the manager of the team that will go to Rio. I think we should keep an eye on him, he might know something that he isn’t telling.”

“Okay, but come outside. I’m in the car. You have to see these files from the technical analysis.”

“I know what it says. The brakes didn’t function.”

“Yes, but they had been previously checked by the mechanic. Something doesn’t add up.”

“I’ll be right there.”

He left the room.

Jackie was waiting in her small brown car. Her ginger hair and green eyes were flaring from the window. She opened the car door and extended a hand to him with a bunch of files.

“Here. Read it yourself.”

Kevin took the files and sat down on the edge of the sidewalk, next to the car. Jackie lit up a cigarette, staring nervously at her watch.

“We should be packing by now. Tomorrow morning we have a plane to Rio. Are those girls still dancing in there?”

Kevin nodded.

“Yes, they are.”

She glanced at him inquiringly. Her sharp intuition could see right through him. She knew he had enjoyed watching the show, but she didn't say a word. She just puffed the smoke away and stared at him, thinking of something he couldn't guess and didn't try.

“The brakes were messed up”, Kevin said after a while.

“Yes, definitely. But who did it – and why?”

“Well, the technical analysis says they were going downhill and the driver didn't adjust the speed so eventually the brakes heated and didn't function anymore. He lost control and the bus went over the cliff. ”

“I don't buy it. Four people are dead. It's the fourth accident with the dancers' team. I don't think it was random. Somebody has a grudge or an agenda.”

“I agree... but we have to see who it is. It must be someone who's been with the team the last four years.”

They stood in silence for a few minutes, staring pensively at the dance hall building that looked like an ancient temple.

Then Jackie's phone rang unexpectedly.

“Yes, lunch is on the table, I left it for you. Don't wait for me. You can go to sleep if you feel tired. Yes, I'll see you tonight. My son, Andrew”, she mentioned sideways after turning the phone off. “He's staying with his uncle while I'm away.”

Kevin didn't comment. He knew Jackie was a single mother, struggling between work and house chores. He also

knew she was a very energetic and active person who could face anything.

“He’ll be fine”, he said browsing through the files.

“He will, but he’s very attached to me and he’s a bit upset that I’m not taking him along. It’s a dangerous trip though.”

“He’s better off at home.”

“I told him I’m not going there for a vacation, just work. He understands, but he’s already waiting for me to come back.”

Jackie finished the cigarette.

“What do you think?” she asked.

It was a question about the files. Kevin slammed the pages shut and handed them back to her.

“It could be someone from inside. It must be someone who had access to the engine. Someone who was with them – someone who knew when and where they would be.”

“Maybe they were followed?”

“Maybe.”

They stared at the busy street.

Kevin was thinking about the dancers. The Spanish girl was still swirling round and round in his mind, her deep dark eyes turning away from his camera, in a delicate, defensive gesture. The Turkish swinger was waving her scarf charmingly, her almond eyes shining for a second and disappearing mysteriously behind the stage.

“We have to make sure it doesn't happen again this time”, he said, staring in the distance.

*

On the plane, the two detectives were seated together at the back of the row. They requested the back seats to have a complete view of the passengers.

It was a small charter, not one of the bigger aircrafts. It was taking a special trip for the dancing team.

Kevin watched carefully every passenger. Most of them were dancers from many countries. He recognized Consuelo from Spain, Aysun from Turkey and a blonde slender girl with braided hair, accompanied by a tall man with features of a carved statue.

“Who's the blond dude with stiff jaws?” he asked Jackie.

“He's Boris - Natasha's boyfriend.”

“Who's Natasha?”

“Slovenia's representative. I thought you watched the dancers yesterday”, she added a bit ironic and amused.

“I did, until you called me outside. Is her boyfriend allowed to be here?”

She smiled.

“He's a dancer too.”

It seemed Consuelo also had company: a dark haired man. By the costume he wore, Kevin thought he must have been a dancer too... or a boyfriend. He wondered.

“That’s Miguel”, Jackie said, catching the direction of Kevin’s somehow worried glance. “Spanish dancer,” she added.

“Is he her boyfriend too?” he asked casually.

“I don’t know. I just got the list of dancers from the pilot. Actually, I have the full list of passengers. We’re taking one more passenger when we get to Brazil. Actually, two.”

“Who are they?”

“The former manager of the dancing team and someone else – they didn’t say.”

“Why is the former manager joining us?”

“It seems he was invited as a gesture of honor because he’s retired and the organizers thought he could have one more view of the contest before he fades out from the business.”

Kevin felt amused. The Italian representative, a slim agile girl, was seated between two male dancers.

“That girl will get in trouble if she doesn’t choose one of the boys soon. We’ll have to break up a fight on the plane. You know how jealous Italians are...”

“Shut up, Kevin. Don’t predict trouble. You always let your imagination wander a lot.”

“Not this time: it’s very real. What about those two?”

“That’s Steven from Romania and Eleftheria from Greece.”

“Yeah she really looks like one of those Olympian goddesses... Isn’t it poetic? Having to dance with someone like that. “

“I don’t like poetry”, Jackie said shortly.

Kevin glanced at Aysun, the charming mysterious Turkish dancer. He smiled.

“This is like Eurovision, with so many countries on board.”

He was enjoying the moment.

The Spartan manager was at the front of the plane. Kevin saw him turn around and glare across the seats. He wondered if the manager considered the detectives a threat to his authority, or if he had other reasons to keep looking persistently in their direction.

The plane took off.

Hours went by. Kevin had let Jackie have the window seat, so she was staring outside most of the time while he was glancing at the passengers. Who could have had a reason to mess with the bus? Who, on that plane, had some hidden purpose to undermine the dancing team and cause an accident?

At some point, he noticed Consuelo getting up and coming to the rear of the plane. She was walking in his direction. In the morning light she didn’t look like a black swan, as the day before, on stage; her hair was flowing freely and the

light blue jeans jacket made her look like a simple tourist – yet her steps were still gracious and she had a vulnerable allure about her. Kevin suddenly found her deep eyes staring at him directly. She smiled unexpectedly.

“Hi”, she said in a friendly voice, startling him.

“Hi”, he answered awkwardly.

She passed by to ask the flight attendant for a glass of water.

It left him speechless for a while: after having seen her dance, he felt intimidated by her presence, so close in front of him. He hadn't expected her to say anything. He certainly hadn't expected her to be friendly, after she had turned away and avoided his photos. He also hadn't expected her to be brave enough to initiate conversation.

He felt he was blushing like a teenager and suddenly became somehow angry with himself for letting a girl confuse his mind so easily. He told himself he was there to find out the truth about the bus – and to protect the team of dancers. He tried to switch his thoughts to a logical and rational trail.

He watched the fluffy clouds outside the window opposite his seat. The safety belt sign was suddenly lit on and turbulences started. The passengers were urged to sit down and lock their seat belts. As the plane was shaking and trembling unpredictably, Kevin wondered what was going on. He noticed they were losing altitude and making turns.

“Are we landing?” he asked Jackie.

She didn't seem too worried.

"I think we arrived at the point where we have to pick up the other passengers – the retired manager and the undisclosed person."

"Why isn't the pilot saying anything? If we're landing, he must announce it."

She shrugged.

"We can't get up and check."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not safe to walk along the plane while it's unstable."

The pilot delayed the announcement, but eventually the microphone buzzed and spoke:

"In ten minutes we'll be landing on a private property. Don't take off your seat belts until the plane has fully stopped."

The plane landed with a jolt.

Everyone unlocked their seat belts and looked out the windows: they were near a tropical forest, at the edge of what appeared to be a farm with a straw hut and a wooden fence.

"I don't think this is where we were supposed to land", Jackie said suspiciously.

The farm seemed deserted.

A bit confused, the passengers rushed to the door. The pilot spoke on the microphone again:

"We landed five kilometers from the airport, where we were supposed to pick up two more passengers for Rio.

Unfortunately, I don't have enough fuel to get there, so I landed the plane and I will contact emergency services to get me out of this place. However, it's a long way and we're in the middle of the forest. I know you have to be in Rio tomorrow, for a big show. The solution is simple: you can walk to the airport. It will take you less than two hours, if you follow the forest track. I can't come with you because I must wait for the technical service team."

Kevin looked at Jackie with doubt.

"This is not right. He's lying. The plane doesn't have enough fuel?"

"Someone has a plan again."

The pilot continued:

"You won't be able to take your luggage with you, because you must walk through the forest. I suggest you take your most important and valuable belongings – phones, wallets, passports and some bottles of water. Nothing more. Your luggage will arrive at the hotel after the plane gets to the airport."

Inside the plane people became agitated.

The Spartan manager was angry. He knocked his fist on the pilot's door.

"You can't leave us in the middle of nowhere! I'll file a complaint! You don't even show your face! Get out of there and face us in person, not through a microphone!"

Yet the pilot didn't show up. He continued in the speakers:

"I'm sorry for your inconvenience, but this situation is distressful for me too. However, I assure you nothing dangerous will happen. It will be just a nice walk through the woods and you'll get to the nearest village where you can take a ride to Rio. In the meantime, I'll contact help and get your luggage to the hotel. Stay calm and enjoy the trip."

"We want our money back!" yelled the imposingly tall Boris who was looking above everyone's heads.

Jackie took out the bulletproof camouflage vests from the upper compartment and threw one of them to Kevin.

"We should open the door. These people are getting restless. We have to get out, or it will get messy in here. They're losing their tempers."

"Don't panic", Kevin spoke loudly and moved through the crowd towards the plane front door.

Boris faced him, looking down and frowning.

"And who are you?"

"I'm the detective who's investigating the accident.

"We don't need investigations now. We need to get to the hotel."

"We'll get there, but not by standing here waiting. Why don't you let me open the door before more accidents happen?"

"Yes, get out of the way", Steven the Romanian dancer added, standing by Kevin's side.

"Thanks, Steven", Kevin told him.

Confronted by the two men, Boris stepped aside and Kevin opened the plane door. The distance to the ground was not high.

He jumped out.

“Come on!” he shouted to the passengers.

One by one, they got out into the sun. Jackie made sure nobody was left on the plane. From his cockpit, the pilot waved at them through the closed window, a pale image of a smile. For a moment, Kevin wondered if it was a person or a ghost.

At the edge of the forest, everything was quiet.

The group of dancers stood there, staring at the trail that went inside the woods.

“Does anyone know what’s in this forest?”

“Anyone has got GPS?”

“There’s no signal here. It must be blocked by the mountains.”

“Do we just venture into the unknown?”

Kevin looked at Jackie. She was smoking a cigarette again.

“Enough with the cigarettes”, he told her. “You’ll get sick. Why don’t you quit?”

“Habit”, she said and came closer, finishing the smoke.

“You’ll set the forest on fire.”

“Fine, I won’t smoke until we get to the hotel. I don’t have anymore cigarettes anyway”, she added with a grin.

Then she looked at her phone.

“Damn, there's no signal here. I can't reach Andrew. He must be waiting for my call.”

“You'll call him later”.

“Yes, when we get to a more civilized place...”

They both stared at the trail that was getting lost through the trees.

“Are you sure we should go that way?” she asked with an uncertain tone.

“I don't see any other way. If we stay here the dancers won't reach the selection in time and none of them will participate in the main show. If we walk, at least we have a chance to get to the hotel faster.”

“Okay then, let's get going.”

“I'll walk ahead and you follow the group to make sure no one gets lost.”

“Sure, don't worry.”

The farm where the plane had landed remained behind, empty and silent.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

