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Anamaria Ionescu
ZODIAC – A Noir Novel from Romania

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Anamaria Ionescu

ZODIAC

A Noir Novel from Romania



CHAPTER ONE

Fat raindrops smacked against the windscreen as the wipers struggled to cope with the dirty mixture of mud and rain from the road. The heavy car seemed to have no trouble with the country road and Dragan was deeply proud of it. He had longed for an SUV from the day he had first held his new driving licence in his hand, but a long series of misfortunes kept on forcing him to postpone his dream. Now that the old man was gone, his inheritance had made his desire come true; a Wrangler Jeep in military green with every optional extra. Driving to work was no longer a chore, even in shitty weather like this.

It went without saying that he still had to work long hours, five days a week in that Godforsaken hole, sleeping in that lousy hut. But when he drove home on a Friday night, he at least knew what he was slaving away for; a car that he loved dearly and the most

beautiful house in Voineasa. The house was the other achievement he was extremely proud of. When his father passed away, his cottage had two small rooms, a dank kitchen and a toilet in the back yard. Now he had a two-storey home, every up-to-date appliance, a big bathroom and anyone could see its big green roof, matching the forest behind, from every corner of the neighbourhood.

'Shit!'

Dragan glanced sideways at his colleague in the passenger seat, making a hopeless attempt to wipe clean a mayonnaise stain on the Jeep's dash.

'Fuck it, Vasile. I told you not to eat in the car.'

'C'mon, man, I was starving.'

Dragan muttered a few angry words and reached for the box of tissues. He reached it easily, but a bump in the road made him drop it. He fumbled for it, keeping a hand on the wheel. As his concentration lapsed, the Jeep swerved off the road and a second later its right tyre was in a ditch. As much as he tried to pull it clear, all he could hear was the sound of the front wheel digging itself deeper into the roadside mud.

'It's no use,' Dragan growled. 'We'll have to get out and see if we can dig it out. And throw that shit away or I'll make you swallow it, wrapper and all.'

For half an hour they tried to get the Jeep clear of the mud that held it tight. When it became obvious that they didn't have a chance in hell of had getting it out with their bare hands, they searched the undergrowth at the side of the road for logs that they could push under the wheels to provide some traction against the mud. Vasile found one that looked the right size and climbed up the pile to pull it free. He lost his footing and tumbled down in a clatter of wood and stones. Dazed, he made an effort to get to his feet. When he'd steadied himself, his eyes focused. What he saw next made him scream. The top of a man's head and one hand protruded from under the logs and stones.

*

Chief Inspector Marius Stanescu paced from one end of his office to the other, puffing smoke like a chimney. Anyone would expect that a senior post in the quiet police district of Sinaia, deep in the lush Prahova valley, packed with tourists for much of the year, would be as good as a session in a spa on the shores of Lake Amara. The truth was that most of the time it was a remarkably relaxed place for law and order. But every now and then something truly mind-boggling would crop up. He had never felt so frustrated in all of his twenty years of policing. Well, maybe that wasn't quite true. There had been that

case five years ago, when an old man murdered that Catholic priest.

At least, back then he had been allowed to get on with his job and catch the criminal. Now the situation was unbelievably complex and he had been forbidden from interfering in a case in his own backyard. Less than forty-eight hours ago, a government official by the name of Sebastian Modrogan had been found dead in his hotel suite. He appeared to be have been poisoned and his much younger fiancée was nowhere to be found. His team dug out some juicy details about the official's private life, including that a year before his death divorce had put an end to twenty-five years of marriage. According to the tabloids, his young blonde chief of staff was the reason for him abandoning his wife. Bitter and ashamed, his former wife had hidden herself away in her home town of Voineasa.

He had been about to go for a trip up there himself to push the investigation forward when a heavyweight from Internal Affairs had marched into his office without knocking, flashing an ID that said his name was Branescu. The man had proceeded to slap a written order on his desk, confiscated the case notes and even the computer hard drives containing information about Modrogan's death. The inspector had tried to protest, but he'd been ignored.

That's why Marius was in his office, chain smoking in anger and frustration. Orders or no orders, he was a policeman and had no intention of backing off just because some officials were jittery about the way he carried out the investigation. But it looked like he had no choice. To hell with every one of them!

He got up and went to the filing cabinet in the corner of the room, took out a couple of files, felt for the bottle at the back and took a decent slug that helped dampen his fury. Back at his desk, he snatched the biggest envelope he could find, and stuffed the remaining case notes into it. In his haste to get the job done, he dropped a photo from the crime scene. He picked it up and took a look. For the life of him, he had no idea what this thing was all about, and most likely, he never would find out. He shrugged his shoulders and dropped the picture into the envelope with the other paperwork. Then he got up, yanked open the door and yelled.

'Vasilescule, rise and shine!'

A young man in uniform appeared.

'Somewhere down the hallway there's a clown from the Internal Affairs Administration who looks like an undertaker,' he said, handing him the envelope. 'Hand him this and tell him that I'll break his legs if he ever shows up again.'

“The old woman lay in the armchair, with the remote in one hand and the drink in the other. Well, she wasn’t that old, but she’d been a heavy drinker and that had definitely taken its toll. And she wore a wig, a bright red one that had slipped incongruously sideways and looked ridiculous. Those open eyes and gaping mouth made me think of a fish on dry land. And, to crown it all, she had a mark on her forehead.’

‘A mark?’ his wife asked, looking up from setting the table.

‘Yeah. Some sort of mark, like she was hit with something. Forensics couldn’t identify it. What’s for dinner? I’m as hungry as a wolf.’

The woman looked her husband in the eyes for a moment.

‘It serves me right for marrying a cop and then having nothing better to do than to ask him how his day was. But to answer your question, we have schnitzel, mashed potatoes and sauerkraut salad.’

*

Lidia buried her face in her hands.

‘Silviu, where the hell are you?’

She must have called him at least a dozen times in the last hour, both his mobile and his landline. The mobile went straight to voicemail, which told her it

had to be switched off, and there was no answer on the home phone. Knowing there was a traffic camera at the end of Silviu’s street, Lidia patched into the system and noticed that his car was parked outside his building. He could still be out, but he usually kept her informed of his whereabouts. They’d spoken in the morning and Silviu had mentioned that he was going to have a girl over for dinner. he’d even asked her for a recipe.

Lidia had spent a few hours searching for a new flat for him. After that little amorous encounter at his place, relocating him was mandatory. By the time she could feel her ankles swollen from sitting still and her eyes aching from staring at the screen, she’d decided it was time for a cup of tea to break the routine. Glancing at her watch, she then realised that she hadn’t done the evening check-in with Silviu yet. He should have texted her a smiley face two hours ago. From that moment on, she’d been glued to the phone trying to reach him, but no luck. Now she was seriously worried.

She got up and strode to her colleague’s desk at the other end of the room. Dragos was busy with a strategy game on his computer. Lidia placed a hand on his shoulder.

‘Dragos, I need help...

‘No problem. Talk to me.’

'It's Silviu. I can't reach him. He should have been in touch two hours ago. He's not answering his phone. His car is parked at his place, but he's nowhere to be seen.'

'Maybe he's watching a movie or something and lost track of time?'

'Doubt it. Last time we spoke he'd invited a girl over and was cooking dinner.'

'A girl? At his place? Lidia, this is not good.'

'Tell me about it! I'm already on the hunt for a new flat. But I have a bad feeling about this. I need to get to him and I can't drive...'

'Let's go,' Dragos said, sweeping up his coat and car keys in a single movement.

*

Lidia couldn't hold back the tears.

'It was my job to watch his back.'

'Lidia, stop it. It's not your fault,' Dragos said, trying to console her.

He could understand his colleague's despair. Their role was almost to be nannies to the agents in the field. They were supposed to gather information and anything else the agents needed to carry out their assignments, and that included providing as much

protection as they could. Lidia had definitely screwed up.

Silviu's death triggered a whole series of headaches for the Agency. These agents were normally untraceable, as good as ghosts. Nobody was supposed to be able to find them, let alone kill them. Dragos was trying to calm Lidia down, but he was also trying to clear his mind of the image of the dead man. Unfortunately, it was now burnt into his retina. Silviu had died on the sofa in his flat, head lolling backwards, eyes open and his belly slashed wide open. Thank God that Manta, his own agent, was a disciplined operator, he reflected. Well, most of the time...

He told himself that most of the time Manta was perfectly capable of looking after himself. But the death of an agent raised an inevitable series of questions. Was the system secure? Were these people sufficiently hidden? Were they, the computer wizards, capable of providing covers and means of protection for the field agents?

Dragos almost wet himself when he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw to his relief that it was one the team.

'Man, what the hell...?'

'Sorry, sir. I came to let you know the chief is here.'

'Branescu? Here?'

The puppetmaster himself was here, so this had to be worse than it looked. He felt sorry for Lidia. Dragos wanted to go out and meet the chief, but something made him stay. Although the thought of it made him sick, he steeled himself to run his eyes over the body lying on the sofa. There was something on the dead man's forehead. A sign of some sort.

*

The early spring was struggling to chase the winter away. Patches of snow coexisted with the green of the grass. Small and shy, spring mountain flowers made the place look fresh.

The statue of Prometheus holding the lightning bolt aloft reflected the rising sun, sending shafts of glittering artificial light to the four corners of the world from his regal position above the Vidraru dam. Sergiu stared at the rebel god's solid muscles for a few seconds, wiped the sweat from his brow with the towel around his neck and started to make his way down the stairs, struggling to get back into the old rhythm.

They'd brought him to this sleepy tourist resort at Vidraru for recovery. His last job ended up in something of a mess, more so than usual, and he'd barely made it out alive. He had shoulder and leg injuries that he was supposed to be recovering from now. After medical treatment, the Agency had decided he needed some rest and recuperation to get back on

his feet, both physically and mentally. The place was pleasant and welcoming. It even had a pretty decent gym, and the landscape was simply breathtaking.

Sergiu Manta walked into the hotel lobby, glancing in passing at the welcome notice. He couldn't understand why They'd named the place The Valley with Fish. It was simply ridiculous. Manta set himself a strict routine; up at six, training beneath Prometheus' watchful gaze, shower, breakfast and a little flirting with the sweet blonde running the restaurant, then entertaining himself with movies, books, rowing on the lake, climbing the rocks. The problem was that he was bored to death. Although he wasn't going to admit it, he missed action.

He shook off his dark thoughts, put on a smile and searched out his favourite member of staff.

'Good morning, miss.'

'Mr. Manta, good morning. How was your morning run?'

'Fine. And hard work. Right now I could eat a horse.'

'I'll see to it. Your usual breakfast? There's fine weather so I'll set the table on the terrace. By the time you're done with your shower everything will be ready for you.'

'You really look after me. Thank you,' Sergiu said and elegantly kissed her hand. The girl instantly flushed