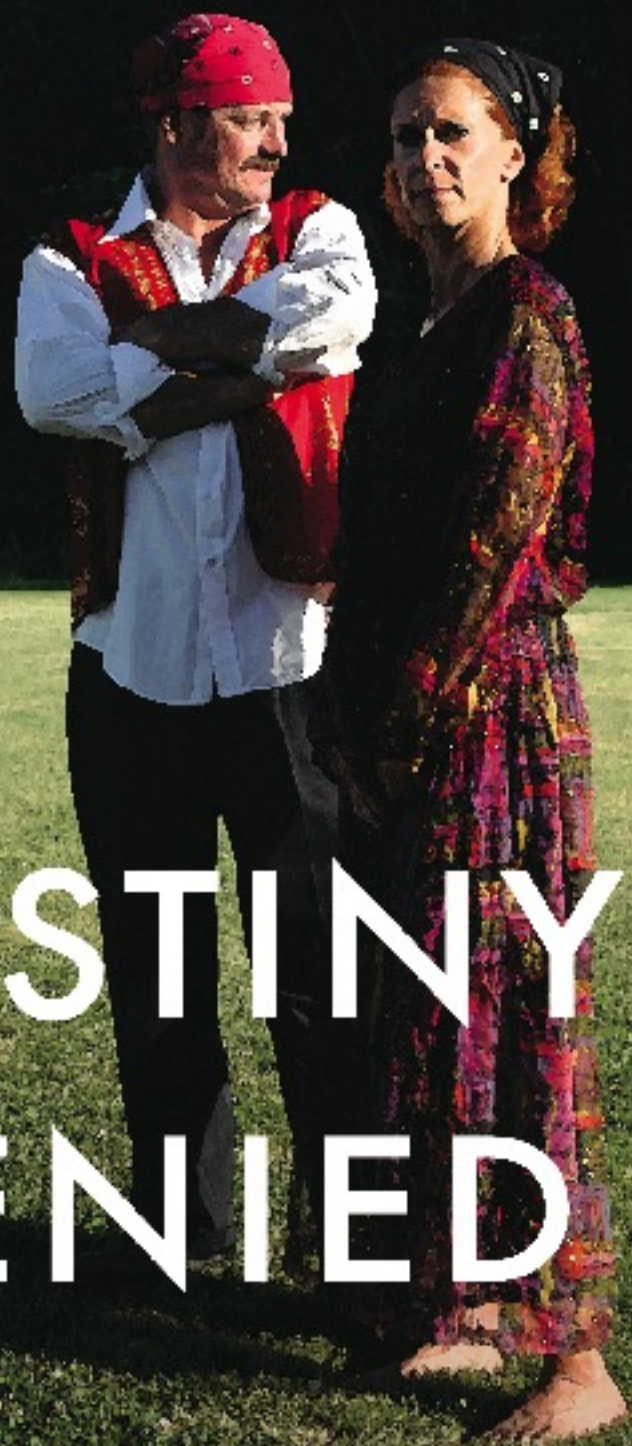


ROSEMARY GARD



DESTINY  
DENIED

# **DESTINY DENIED**

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First Edition

“Every man has his own destiny: The only imperative is to follow it, to accept it, no matter where it leads him.”

--Henry Miller

## PROLOGUE

### STEFAN'S JOURNEY...1907

Stefan had to leave. His distraught mother was talking about killing anyone who would try to take away what she felt rightfully belonged to her son. His Teta Sofie adopted the peasant Katya as her own daughter, meaning there was the possibility that Stefan was no longer his aunt's heir. And now it was publicly known that Ivan Balaban was not the blacksmith's son, but really Stefan's half brother. Would Ivan now be an heir to the Vladeslav holdings?

And...there was the terrifying Turk wanting more money for a gambling debt. Stefan had to leave!

No one at the house saw Stefan leave. Leading his horse through the thick forest on the hilltop road, he followed the narrow path. Watching the Gypsy camp on the hill, near the road was Ivan, seated looking down. Neither spoke when Ivan turned to look up at Stefan, each of them knowing they had to part.

When handsome Stefan reached Zagreb, he sold his horse and saddle to buy a ticket on the Orient Express which was headed for Istanbul, at that time known as Constantinople.

The Orient Express consisted of two baggage cars, four sleeping coaches, each with up to sixteen beds, and a restaurant coach.

Stefan's personal steward had the good manners not to look disapprovingly at the small bag Stefan handed him. The steward escorted Stefan to compartment twelve. The cabin was a very nice sitting room with a mirror, comfortable settee and a table. The cabin could easily be converted into a sleeping room at night. The W.C. or bathroom was at the end of the rail car. The cabin doors opened out onto a narrow, window-lined corridor with low benches available for

ROSEMARY GARD

seating. At night, the steward in charge of the cabins in his rail car slept on the comfortable benches, always on call, ready to serve.

“Pull this cord if you wish tea or anything else.” The thin balding steward named Marian, said. He wore a crisp grey uniform with bright brass buttons. He showed Stefan the thick grey cord to pull for service. Before leaving, Marian asked, “Is there anything Monsieur needs? You will be notified when meals are being served.”

Marian opened the door to leave, taking another look around to see that he had not overlooked anything. Through the open door an elderly woman, perhaps a governess, dressed in grey, paused to stare at Stefan. The white-haired woman moved on as Marian backed out of the door, closing it.

Removing his gloves, Stefan looked around. This was very elegant...perhaps too elegant. He was out of money. This may have been a foolish plan. Actually, it hadn't been a plan. He saw the train at the station and boarding it was a spur of the moment decision. What if he doesn't meet a rich woman who needs a companion for the summer? He was used to having women pay for his companionship in Zagreb, but on the Orient Express it may be another matter.

*The meals...*he didn't think to ask if the meals were included in his ticket. What was he going to do when it was time to go to the restaurant car and a bill might be presented? It was now even more obvious to him that he had not properly thought out abandoning his home in Vladezemla. Was he expected to dress for dinner? His wardrobe was lacking the essentials for such company as he might meet on this train. The Orient Express was the equivalent of a luxury hotel on wheels. How long could he go without eating, he wondered? Could he stay in his compartment during the whole trip?

He was so deep in thought, that the gentle knock at the door startled him.

“Yes, come in.” he said.

Marian, the steward, handed Stefan a note. Stefan read it.

“Does Monsieur wish to send a reply?” the steward asked.

“No...no, that won't be necessary.”

*DESTINY DENIED*

Stefan smoothed his hair and looked at this handsome reflection in the small mirror on the back of the door. His dark hair framed a face with the smooth complexion any woman would envy. He had nice straight teeth, not something so common in the early 1900's. He liked what he saw and winked at his reflection with those blue eyes, the eyes that made most women melt.

He straightened his cravat and brushed the lint from his blue coat. He was being summoned by a woman. Was she the daughter of a wealthy American businessman? He could say he was the son of a count or even introduce himself as a count. Rich Americans were impressed by royalty. Oh, if he had only brought more clothes!

The note read: "Please join me in #16 for dinner." It was signed, "A lady friend."

As he left his number twelve compartment on the short trip to compartment sixteen, he hoped this lady friend was a beauty. He was in no position to be choosy. It didn't matter what she looked like, just as long as she needed a paid companion for the summer, or longer if she wished.

At the door of compartment sixteen, Stefan smoothed his hair once more and straightened his cravat before gently knocking.

The door was opened by the same white-haired woman dressed in a grey long skirt and grey jacket, who had stared at him through the open door of his compartment. The woman stepped aside to let Stefan enter. He assumed her to be a servant. The lady friend who sent the note was probably inside, thought Stefan as he looked around. The woman closed the door and with hands on her hips, threw her head back laughing heartily.

Thinking this was some sort of a trick, or perhaps a trap, Stefan instinctively reached for the door handle ready to leave.

"This is too wonderful," said the prim older woman, no longer laughing, but smiling broadly. "I can't believe Stefan Vladeslav will be my traveling companion." She motioned for him to be seated. "We have so much to talk about."

When he hesitated, she said, "Please, please make yourself comfortable."

*ROSEMARY GARD*

Seated in a comfortable velvet backed chair, still bewildered, Stefan studied the woman warily. He said nothing, just stroked his chin. The voice...he was sure he had heard that voice before. But, he could not place this prim matron standing before him. Had she been a governess? No...none of his friends had been cared for by a governess. After a few moments he said, "Forgive me, it appears you know me, but I must apologize, I cannot place you."

"I am hurt." She pretended to be offended. "You don't remember those nights when I greeted you at my door and let you gamble even when you had no money...shame on you." She playfully admonished.

With a look of wonder, Stefan rose from the chair and studied the woman's smiling face. He looked deep into her small eyes, the color no longer the bright blue of her youth, but now a pale hue. Her face was fleshy. Her hands looked so familiar. He stepped back and looked at her. Her white hair was coiled on top of her head. A ruffled collar surrounded her lined throat. He envisioned her with hennaed hair, her eyes outlined with kohl and her cheeks colored with rouge. He recalled seeing her wearing a bright orange caftan, standing at the entrance of the gambling house on that terrible night...the night he first met the Turk!

Stefan didn't say anything for a long time. Still not sure, hesitantly he said, "Magda, can it be you?"

Now her face crinkled with joy and she threw her arms around him. "Oh, Stefan, I never thought I would see you alive again."

Seeing his perplexed look, she added, "Abuh said he would kill you if you did not pay him the money he wanted. So," she added, "you must have paid him."

"I never saw him." Stefan was surprised. "When did he say he would kill me?"

"The same night I decided to leave." she said. "He was on his way to see you."

Stefan remembered the awful Turk and his arrogant sneer. A round man, dressed in black pants, black vest, with a red fez atop his head. Stefan didn't want to think about the Turk...the frightening Turk.

*DESTINY DENIED*

Still holding her hand he asked, “What is this? Why the drastic change in appearance? Have you taken a position as a governess or nanny?”

She waived her plump hand at the chair. “Sit down.”

With a firm pull of a cord she summoned the cabin steward.

“Let’s have dinner here together.” she said. “We have so much to talk about.”

When Marian arrived, Magda asked, “Is the compartment next to mine occupied?”

The steward’s discreet eyes glanced briefly at Stefan, “No, Madam, it is available.”

“Good, then have my nephew’s things moved there and unlock the adjoining door.”

“Yes, Madam,” said Marian a bit smugly, assuming Stefan to be a gigolo.

“Mama will be surprised when I tell her I ran into Teta Magda on the train.” This was said loud enough by Stefan for Marian to hear. It didn’t matter, for the steward didn’t care what went on, as long as he was remembered with a good tip at the end of the journey. Marian had witnessed many romantic encounters on the Orient Express, all of them far more interesting and romantic than this encounter of what he thought to be an old nanny and a young gigolo.

Magda said to the steward, “We will have some tea now and our dinner in the cabin this evening.”

“Yes, Madam,” Marian bowed as he exited, but not without giving Stefan a long look.

At dinner, tasting the spicy soup Stefan said, “So you have run away from the Turk.”

“And you have run away from your family,” replied Magda, adjusting the linen napkin on her lap.

Magda listened as Stefan told her about Katya, of Ivan being his half brother and his Mother’s obsession with the family money. It seemed so natural for him to unburden himself to her. It was indeed as if she were his real Teta, his aunt.



ROSEMARY GARD

They were very comfortable with each other and discussed many private and personal things during the delicious meal. Wine was served with dinner and it made them more relaxed. With dinner completed, Marian removed the plates and brought in coffee and brandy, leaving a dessert tray.

With her feet comfortably on a foot stool, Magda sipped her coffee. She looked at Stefan, cup in one hand, her cigarette in the other and marveled at how handsome he was. They smoked and sipped in contented silence. After a while, Magda said, "We must decide what we are going to do. I have some money, but not enough to last us if we want to live comfortably."

Stefan gave Magda a long look. *What did she have in mind?*

"We?" he asked. "Are we to be a couple?"

Stefan didn't expect her wild burst of laughter. "Stefan! Look at me," she demanded, "I am not a young woman. What did you think I meant?"

His face reddened. He was embarrassed that he mistook her meaning.

Before he could say anything, Magda went on, "We could travel together with you as my devoted nephew and I your aunt." When he didn't respond, she continued, "We will stay at the finest hotels. We shall get some very fashionable and expensive clothes while we travel about Italy and France gambling."

Stefan straightened in his chair, his eyes grew wide. He liked the idea.

"What if we lose all your money?" He asked.

"We won't." She pointed a finger at him. "You will play and I will watch." She added, "I may play occasionally, when it is socially acceptable."

Magda could see him thinking this over. She said, "I can spot a cheater easily and I can predict who has the winning hand or who is bluffing. I have watched card players for many years and learned to read their faces and actions."

"But, how will you let me know?" He was interested in this plan.

*DESTINY DENIED*

“We will work out a series of signals. For instance, if I fool with my right earring, it could mean one thing, while using my fan could mean something else.”

They talked long into the night working out the signals and decided to get off the train at the next stop to head back towards Italy. When it was time for Stefan to go to his adjoining compartment, he politely kissed Magda’s hand. Gone was the tinted red haired woman who owned Magda’s and gone was the irresponsible young man. They would carry themselves in a manner suggesting a wealthy aunt traveling with her nephew.

In time that was what they became. Stefan was respectful of Magda and she treated him like a loving family member, never overstepping herself or making demands. After all, she understood men better than most mothers and wives did. When he needed romantic company, she appeared not to notice.

Madame Magda Petrovich and her nephew, Stefan Vladeslav arrived at the lovely Grand Hotel Gardone, in Brescia Italy on the shore of Lago di Garda.

“Contessa Petrovich,” announced Antonio, the pleasant manager of the hotel, bowing low. “We have an excellent suite of rooms for you and the Count with a magnificent view of the lake.” He turned and gave Stefan a courteous bow.

Magda bestowed a gracious smile on the stocky manager and offered her hand, which he politely lifted to his lips.

Such a grand lady! *True nobility*, thought Antonio, as he waved to the uniformed porters to hurry with the trunks and cases.

Everyone loved Contessa Petrovich. She and her nephew never displayed superior attitudes, but were always so gracious and charming.

The elegant Hotel Gardone had been built in 1884 and offered all the richness the late Victorian Era had to offer. The oriental carpets along with comfortable brocade sofas and chairs were symbols of elegance and comfort for their elite guests. Crystal chandeliers

*ROSEMARY GARD*

sparkled in the sunlight and in the evening, when lit, reflected on the etched glass doors leading to the superb restaurant.

Magda, the former owner of a gambling house and brothel, along with Stefan, the disappointing son of Anton Vladeslav, never alluded to the titles of Countessa and Count. The fine clothes they wore, the elegant manner in which they spoke and conducted themselves, led people to assume they were nobility.

“Magda Petrovich,” she would say when meeting someone new, extending her hand in greeting, “and my nephew, Stefan Vladeslav.”

They were polite to the staff, never demanding or condescending. Sometimes Magda would present the hotel manager, with a cravat or stick pin as a gift, ensuring the finest attention should they visit that hotel again.

It took only six months of traveling throughout Italy and France, always staying in the best hotels, for Magda and Stefan to become, in a manner of speaking, celebrities.

“We have the same rooms that you occupied on your last stay with us.” said Antonio watching Magda closely for a hint of disapproval should something be out of place or displeasing to her.

“It is beautiful as always, Antonio.” Magda made a point of remembering names and using them whenever appropriate. “And the flowers are lovely.” She lifted her hand to indicate the colorful floral arrangements which stood on almost every table.

“It is an honor that you wish to stay with us. I have engaged Amelia as your maid during your stay. She took care of you the last time you were here.”

Magda nodded approvingly, “Thank you, I like Amelia.”

“What about Santino?” Stefan asked about the slender valet he remembered from a previous stay. “Is he available?”

“Ah, yes!” Antonio beamed with pleasure that his cousin Santino was requested. “He is already in your room attending to your clothes.”

Magda turned to the windows taking in the scenic view of beautiful Lake Garda. The long slim lake stretching from north to south had been a luxury summer destination even for the ancient Romans.

*DESTINY DENIED*

“Can I do anything more for you, Madam?” asked Antonio, “Also, refreshments are on the way.” he added.

Magda looked at Stefan, who was seated on a blue and white brocade chair. “Anything you need?”

“No, Teta, everything is perfect as always.” Stefan said Teta whenever he could to ensure the notion that they were aunt and nephew.

Antonio smiled, seeing everything in order he was about to leave when Magda asked, “Have arrangements been made for our evening’s entertainment?”

“Ah, yes, Contessa. Signor Anello has extended an invitation to his villa. He asked me to say that you will know everyone attending and that it will be the usual sort of gathering.”

As if considering the invitation, Magda asked Stefan, “Do you feel like a game of cards tonight?”

Stefan rose from the chair. “Yes, let’s go. Salvatore is such a gracious host and his friends are pleasant.”

“Molto buono, very good,” said Antonio. “Signor Anello will send a carriage for you at eight, if that is convenient for you.”

With Amelia, in Magda’s room, unpacking the trunks and Santino in Stefan’s room doing the same, Magda and Stefan were careful not to discuss their business or be overheard.

“Let’s go on the terrace.” said Magda opening the tall glass door leading to the sunny balcony. A warm breeze scented by lemon trees, flowers and the lake greeted them.

“This may be our last trip to Salvatore’s.” said Magda. “He makes me uncomfortable.”

“How is that?” asked Stefan, lighting a cigarette, scanning the beach below for beautiful sun bathers.

She thought of Salvatore for a moment. He was a big man, salt and pepper hair and beard, “His eyes...,” she replied, “he watches us too closely.”