

Return

'Don't you have at least an apple in that fridge over there? I am starving!' Valkuda did not move out of the circle of his arms though.

'All the apples were eaten by an admirer of yours and that is not me. I will bring you there to express your displeasure directly by pulling at his black mane! How about an al fresco breakfast with Smerch and we will see who else.'

'A breakfast? Shall I point that it is past midday, my love?'

'Even better, we may go to the club, have lunch and go riding to digest it, what do you think?'

'If you stop tugging on this sheet I may start thinking, but if you don't I am not quite sure we will make it for supper either.'

'What a great prospective! Come here!'

'Tanás, let it go! God, I don't have any clothes anyway!'

'I can go and get your stuff from the big house...'

'You will do that for me? Really?'

'For the bonnie lass who made a bed to me, I will do everything. One day or another, I will have to face my brother, why not now... I hope you will still love me with all my broken bones and black eyes! I will call him first and I will go. You stay here and keep the bed warm. There are some cookies in the cupboards; you will not starve until I come. Later we will go downstairs to tell Mrs. Hlebarova that she will hear two pairs of steps and it will not be an imagination.' Tanás kissed the top of her head and stood up. He picked up his phone and dialed.

Dimitar answered on the second ring. The elder brother braced himself and started, "Dimitar, I...'

'I know, I was at Brashlyan yesterday and then at Stavros. I wish I could say that it is OK, but it is not, yet rest assured, I will survive. I was thinking of calling you in fact. It is not what you think again, but I will be

glad to discuss it with you and Valkuda if possible. I guess she would like to get her stuff also. Listen, come here, I will be civil, I promise.'

'I will have to discuss it with her, will you hold on?' Tanas covered the mouthpiece and turned towards the fairy in the bed.

'We are cordially invited to a civilized discussion at the big house and hopefully he will not poison the wine. Would you like to come with me?'

'I would not like, but you are right, it will be sooner or later anyway. I will come. When?'

'When would you like to see us, bro?'

'Now if you like, I will call for some Chinese and we may sit upstairs. Just put some clothes on.'

'You don't have a hidden camera around my place, do you?' Tanas groaned.

'No, but what am I supposed to think about two newlyweds one of whom is you and the other is...'

'We will discuss that later. So two chicken with fried noodles and vegetables please and we will bring the sweets.'

Instead of getting to his wardrobe, Tanas went back to the bed and hugged the edgy Valkuda.

'I want you to know that whatever you decide to do, it will be my choice as well. We will survive without starving, maybe not much high flying, but it will be decent. I want to take a month to go to Vassiliko and work with Stavros before the winter strikes. We may rent something small and have a honeymoon there. You probably had not had a day off since first grade so it will work. We will take it from there. What do you think?'

'As I am between jobs it is fine with me, I will be a lady of the house for a change! When are we going to Vassiliko?' Valkuda grinned at him

'After we buy you that swimsuit that you seem to miss all the time! Tonight if you want to beat the traffic. No, tomorrow, we need to buy you a helmet! A gorgeous green one if you wish although it will clash somewhat with the cold blue. How do you think I got to Stavros - on the Harley. It is still in his excuse for a shack over there guarded by Gantcho the rooster. Any chance I can talk you into riding a bus there?'

'Done. Now will you please bring my bag from the car, I need some clothes if we are to get out.'

Dimitar was sitting alone on the roof terrace and trying to get himself to be civil or as close to civil as he could. He had spent the evening writing and re-writing his speech to Valkuda, by midnight had torn all the drafts and had gone to bed. Dimitar had been contemplating calling without rehearsal when Tanas had called first. Why had he asked them to come to his place? They could have sat in any decent restaurant and discuss his business proposal. It was too late for it. The Chinese food was on the table, sparkling water in the fridge and his misery like a cloud around him. "You got the solitude!" Mad Stavros had told him. Maybe the man was not that mad after all. The young sculptor needed a break. The intercom buzzed.

It was expected to be awkward and it was, with the silence and the three of them talking at the same time, with covered glances and open challenges, but generally it could be described as civil and Tanas was proud of his younger brother. He had not made one snide remark yet and they were there for almost half an hour. He was about to toast to that when Dimitar dropped the bomb.

'If you both agree, I would like Valkuda to remain the top manager of the holding. As Andon Tsarev said, the fact that you are not married to me does not make you less suitable.' He let a nervous laugh.

'And what are you going to do?' The professed capable manager was quick to inquire.

'I was thinking about going back to France for a while and then splitting time between Paris and Sofia, if you don't mind. I know I am not cut to manage anything but my own career. I will double your salary and you will choose an assistant like we discussed before. I need time to think it over, I am sorry.'

'And you are not afraid that we will grab the money and run?'

'No, not that I don't care, but you are a family now anyway. If you need time to think...'

'If I agree, will I still have my month off as we discussed?'

'Sure! Does that mean that you will consider it?'

'That means that I will accept. And you will have my choice of assistant manager by the end of September, as soon as I am back from holiday, if that is correct with you.'

'Just like that?'

'It had always been just like that, as you grandfather liked to say. I will go get some luggage and will be back for more desserts!' Valkuda put down her fork and disappeared.

'One hell of a woman, I am telling you!'

'My woman, I am telling you!'

'I know, I know, marriages are forever. Tell me honestly, are you not bothered about her and Grandpa, her and me, we shared a bed with her in Brashlyan few days ago, doesn't that irk you at least a little?' Dimitar's eyes were slits.

His brother bended over the table and patted his shoulder. 'Don't make me think bad of you, little brother, for I cannot imagine how a red-blooded man can be in the same bed with her and let her go untouched. There had never been any Grandpa and her or anybody and her if that matters to you, although it should not now.'

'You want to say that you ...'

'I thought that you the French students were more open on the subject but to spare your delicate senses, yes, I was the one and only and it will remain so until I am alive. So hands down, you can have her brain for hire if that is what she wants, for as long as she wants and not a second longer. One more thing - you insult her and I will skin you alive and make from your epidermis a doormat for her office.'

'Yes, sure!'

'Just watch me - I will personally stitch it and add frills and laces on it if that is what she wants. Seriously, I wish your thick French-chiseled head would have a tiny opening somewhere to see how unique she is. On the other hand I am glad that it had not have or the balance would not tilt in my favor. Do you want a chocolate petit-four or a vanilla one with almonds?'

'Almonds, you probably had eaten all the decent chocolate ones already. Stavros said that you may be making bells.'

'I was ready to spare you the last one, but I will keep it for Vale, she needs to eat.'

'I had no idea she was starving before!'

'No, but if everything is as I hope you will be an uncle in May. The girl needs her strength. I hope you will toss the extra maternity benefits in that contract of yours. I will be reading it, better be good.'

'I see you are not wasting time...'

'Nope, Stavros said that if I postpone it, someone will ride my bike, figuratively speaking. To answer your previous question, yes, we are going back to him tomorrow and he will teach me to make bells. It is fascinating how much the man knows about them!'

'Tell me, I have some idea how to do them but never touched the practical side, I am curious.'

Saturday afternoon was seeping away and Stavros was thinking how much work there would be the next morning. The wine was ready to be filtered in its bottles and it would take hours and hours with only one pair of hands. He had done it time and again, it would be fine, he thought and looked at Gantcho who cocked his head and rushed to the dusty road. Few moments later a black Jeep roared into view.

'It is unexpected, Gantcho, but remember I told you he would come...' - Stavros stood up and shaded his eyes.

The Jeep stopped and Gantcho backed off as three people came out. The woman hugged his master and the two guys unloaded some luggage. It was not wise to jump on them. One was heading to the steering wheel side, when the old man stopped him.

'I am proud of you, sonny. Come back whenever you like, we will save some wine for you!'

To say that it was a lazy month, one could honestly not. After the wine was securely plugged in the various green bottles, sealed and hidden, Tanas had a routine made for him. He would start the day with some reading while Valkuda slept snuggled to him, they all would have a hearty breakfast, Tanas would have a briefing with Mila over the phone and from there on until the late lunch he would work with Stavros. Diagrams, thicknesses, alloys, texture of outside shell, wooden forms, wax forms, false clay bells, temperature of melting, temperature of pouring, tones and harmonics, shaving, clappers. Valkuda was amusing herself with cooking and gardening, putting the little patch in order, gathering berries for small batches of blackberry or raspberry wine or simply lazing with book in hand under the thick shadow of the giant pear tree in the yard. The only contacts with the good people of Vassiliko were when Tanas was going shopping for food or when he would drive her and Stavros to the "Five on a Stick" place. The autumn was beating the summer. The nights were getting a bit of a nip when Valkuda and Tanas indulged in a little longer stargazing. Dimitar had long gone to France and was sending them cheeky e-mails full of outrageous suggestions for baby names. They were planning to be back in Varna on September 25th, exactly a month after their wedding. Life was good.

The Green Fairy was rattling down the stone path and its lone driver was tired. At the last moment Vantche's colleague had come up with a broken leg and the boss of the surgeries had refused to let his only remaining anesthesiologist go even with the promise to be back in forty-eight hours. Tantche was given all the necessary instructions as well as tons of precautions, premonitions and other pleasantries and had taken to the road alone. She was a fast driver and the road was familiar now, but by the outskirts of Bourgas she was exhausted. Tantche wanted to sleep desperately, but was afraid that if she dozed for a minute she may be late. It would not be fair to Mitzi and Iossif. It would have been far easier for Rada to do it, but she had been hysterical and Konstantin had called for help. Rada's test had shown a second line and he was beyond himself with joy. He had pleaded with Tantche about the bad family history in Rada's mother and grandmother's pregnancies and coerced her to come and see Iossif one last time. Another turn and the village was there. That was good as the storm Tantche had been dodging since turning from the main road seemed to be closing at her.

'You promise you will marry me if I ask when I grow up?' Iossif was hugging Mitzi. 'Then I will eat this meatball as well to grow faster!' the child pointed at her plate. He heard the noise of the coming car and ran out to meet his favorite blondie. She always smelled nice and brought chocolate which Iossif had not eaten before but liked a lot now. The boy stopped in front of the flower-decorated Trabant and shrieked with delight. Tantche was showing him through the windshield the biggest chocolate he had ever seen. Oh, it was going to be fun!

They went in the kitchen hand in hand and he showed everyone his treat.

'Shall I keep it for tonight?' He asked Mitzi who unexpectedly burst in tears, but nodded "No!" and he unwrapped it fast.

'It goes with a glass of milk, my dear!' Tantche went to the fridge to pour it herself. Iossif was preoccupied with the bar to pay attention to the time it took her to bring the cup to him.

'You said at midday, Mitzi?' the blondie asked cautiously. The old woman nodded. Tantche bended to Iossif and held the cup. 'Drink all the cup, my dear! I will wait for you!'

Iossif obediently drank until the glass that she held to his lips was empty, then returned to the chocolate, offering everyone a piece.

'Thirty minutes!' Tantche looked at her wrist watch. 'Mitzi, you will have five of them only!'

The old woman wiped her red-rimmed eyes and hugged lossif fiercely. He looked at her with gaze that was starting to get drowsy.

'You don't need to cry. It will be fine. You said I am in a fairytale, so it is finishing, right?'

'Yes, it is, but we will meet again and I will marry you then! I will be young and beautiful! Now swallow this fast!' Mitzi was holding a double doze of immune boosters.

'The funny sweats! I will but I will finish the chocolate also!'

The determination kept him awake and chatting just until he munched the last square and fell asleep in Mitzi's arms.

'His shirt, fast, we need to send him in the clothes he came in!' Mitzi pulled them out of her handbag. There were no problems with his trousers. They were tied with a string and despite being short and narrow the women managed to get the sleeping lossif in them. The shirt was too small - for the two months he had grown a head taller and much bigger. It would not go over his head.

'Good grievance,' Tantche exclaimed, 'it is ruined anyway!'

The blondie took a knife and sliced the lower part that had remained uncut - through the crusted blood and all. Then she lovingly shifted the sound asleep child and put it on like a vest. The young woman did one last check of lossif's scar and smeared it with cream one more time. A loud thunder sounded nearby. Tantche looked at her watch - they were getting perilously close to midday. Konstantin emerged, took the sleeping lossif in his arms and the three of them run to the church. The sky grew gray and after that almost black. The clouds were getting low enough for the church cross to pierce them. Konstantin laid lossif on the wide stone steps that were hot from the morning sun and pulled Tantche away. Mitzi stayed with the child while the wind started hauling around and swirling ribbons of fine dust. Out of nowhere a mighty hawk appeared and after circling once zeroed on them. The old woman quickly bended and kissed lossif's forehead, then stepped aside. The bird sprawled its enormous wings and when it flapped them, the hawk flew away carrying the child into the sky as if he did not weight more than a rag doll.

'I will be going back through Sofia; would you like to come with me?' Tantche lightly put a hand on Mitzi's shoulder. The old woman had refused any sedatives and was looking miserable. Rada had been hiding in her bedroom and did not want to speak to Tantche. She was not yet over the fact that her best friend had helped Tanas marry Valkuda instead of giving Dimitar the time to talk to her first. The blondie was unrepentant - even the sculptor had called before flying to France that all had been for the best.

'I will need to get my luggage, my dear; I did not want to waste a moment with Iossif. It should take an hour or so at least. Would you like to stay here and wait for me or you will be going immediately?'

'I was thinking as I am anyway in the vicinity, I will go and see the newlyweds in Vassiliko. In that case I can pass by and pick you up tomorrow.'

'You will not stay here? Where are you going to stay then?'

'No, as much as I love her Rada really needs to learn to let it go and it is not the time to press. I will find something in Vassiliko or will unfold the Green Fairy's back seats. I am joking, Mitzi, the season is over so there should be plenty of places there. See you tomorrow!'

It was a beautiful toy, Gantcho thought, it was not worth battling, all flowers and green at it, but job was job, so he made enough noise for the three inhabitants of the house to run outside and laugh. They hugged the petite blondie that came out and did not want to hear about her going anywhere. Stavros insisted that she should sleep in his tower and he would take the kitchen sofa. Tantche was too tired to argue and after few pieces of watermelon with feta dropped asleep on the table. Valkuda run to set the bed while Tanas carried the young doctor upstairs. She was the one who had married them and standing at her bed they both smiled. Valkuda bended to tuck her and Tanas solicitously closed the shutters - the storm had been brewing since the morning and better be prepared. They came down the stairs where Stavros was clearing up the table.

'It is going to be a bad one tonight; I feel it in my bones. The meteo says that it is some wind and some rain, but what is coming is going to be blasted much. Tanas, do you know how to drive that painted matchbox that your matron rides around? Yes? Good, go and park it in the big barn and lock the doors everywhere. I see even Gantcho has gathered his girls inside. Vale, get everything that is not nailed inside and maybe we

can even pick whatever is left of the watermelons from the garden. We have another hour, two the most before it starts in earnest, but we will have it full force around midnight, I think.'

They worked fast, closing shutters and gathering furniture and stuff from the outside. The temperature was dropping rapidly and the wind which started in the early evening was gathering force. Valkuda was taking out the candles and matches, filling bottles and buckets with fresh water as the pump would probably give up after the electricity would be cut. Tanas and Stavros were gathering the fruits and vegetables that could be harvested, securing the doors of the pen and the barns and verifying the small ancient generator. The gale started hauling threateningly. The old house screeched and sighed.

Stavros made a stop to wipe his brow and looked with concern at the sea. Few lights were still dangling in the waves.

'Bad time to be at sea, I am telling you! Hopefully the men will be in the harbor soon. The waves are going to be brutal, the Devil current was stark visible, said a guy today at the fish place.'

Tanas came in carrying a large pumpkin and looked at the kitchen which was full of stuff.

'I am glad we have Tantche to help tomorrow at the preserve stage, that is it, if we are not blown away tonight together with the jars. I put the remaining wood in the barn. It is in a pile in the middle of everything but tomorrow I will do it accurately.'

In the silence after his words they heard the heavy splotches outside which were coming faster and faster.

'The house is fine, it had survived worse. Tomorrow we will go gather wood at the beach and some other stuff that would come from the bottom. But we have to be early there, or there would be a line, say like five, five-thirty the latest.'

The light flickered several times.

'Thanks for the bed, lass, now run to yours!'

They were halfway up the stairs when the electricity was cut off.

The faint noise from the kitchen guided Tantche downstairs. Tanas and Stavros were taking their equipment - two axes, some ropes, an old net and a beaten basket.

'May I join the crowd that searches for treasures? I will behave!'

'Come, an extra pair of hands will not be wasted! Tell me, what did you dream of tonight?'

'How do you know I dreamed tonight?'

'I will tell you later for not to bias your response!'

'It was an odd dream in fact, I was down at the cove and threw a net and caught a man, you know, the dream of every woman, blond, blue eyes, million-dollar smile and no wedding band on his finger. When I saw you with the net, I thought that I may ask you to try my luck in earnest. It is funny; an old gypsy told me that I will fish my man from the sea, so let us hurry up, while not all of the good ones are taken.'

Stavros cocked his grey head, 'And where was this gypsy at that time?'

'In Melnik, where there is no water to drink as far as I am aware! Are we going?'

There was a lot of driftwood, a lot of garbage and to Tantche's delight she found a little gold coin with a profile of a man which looked ancient. They searched around for more, but she was the only one who had lucked.

'You see, I fished my man from the sea! If I dig in the history books I can find if he was actually blond and gorgeous!' She waved her find at the rising sun. The sea was still not calm and a lot of stuff was floating in the cove. Tantche zeroed on something and yelled 'There, over there, what was that?' She was pointing at a floating piece somewhat bigger than the garbage around. The doctor stuffed the coin in Stavros's hand and jumped into the waves.

'She is crazy, she will drown, she lives next to a karst cave, damn it!' Tanas grabbed the rope and jumped after her.

'You may be underestimating her, my boy!' murmured Stavros. Tantche was gaining speed and distance and even a decent swimmer like Tanas could not catch up with her. She reached the object first and when Tanas arrived, she was pushing a pair of man's legs over the door with two buoys attached to it. It was no place to argue whether the man was dead or alive, they had to get to the shore first to find out. Tanas deftly tied his rope to the makeshift raft and Tantche joined forces with him to pull. The waves were getting worse or so it looked like. When they reached the shore, Stavros went into the water to pull also as they were exhausted. They dragged the door on the sand and untied the man, Tanas bended him on his knee, pressed and a gush of water came from the man's mouth. Stavros grabbed him and plopped the body back on the door, Tantche started pumping air in his lungs and Tanas pressed his chest faster and faster. Few

minutes or few centuries passed before the limp body convulsed in a series of rapt coughs and stopped being so limp. A pair of blue eyes opened and a raspy voice said, 'Thank you!'

The blue eyes closed back again, but that time it was the simple faint that made them close. Stavros wiped Tantche's cheeks and asked, 'Did that gypsy mentioned that there would be two men that you will catch the same day?'

'You may keep the first, I am getting this one!' The doctor pointed at the unconscious dark blond man. 'He does not have a wedding band as far as I have seen!'

'And if he had, what, we would have tossed him back?'

'Of course no, but now it is finders keepers and I saw him first!'

'We would have given him to you anyway; neither Stavros, nor I need him! Especially as I have to carry him up to the house!' Tanas pointed up the hill.

'That bathtub that he had been riding had a good name!' Stavros chuckled, pointing at the buoy with a bleached but readable black sign "Faith".

'I think we can wake him up now!' Tantche knelled before the man and started patting and flapping. The blue eyes opened again and this time focused on her.

'I hope you are not a mermaid!' the man said, grabbing her hand.

'It is your lucky day, I am not! Do you think that you may try to sit while holding my hand?'

The man sat and looked around. He blinked and coughed again, then said, 'I have to thank you for saving my skin!'

'You already did it before you fainted! Now how about we go up to the shack and feed you and we will all get a drink and talk. The lady and the gentleman did not bring bathing suits so we are drenched and it is getting cold again. Let's go and change! Are you up to walking with a little help?' Stavros was looking at the gray clouds that were gathering.

The four of them made enough noise for the startled Valkuda to run downstairs in her nightgown.

'One more fairy?' the blue eyed man asked.

'This fairy is mine, Valkuda is my wife, but Tantche the mermaid is a free woman, just to inform you,' Tanas admired the spirit of the man who half an hour ago had been a small step aside from the path of no return.

'Love, we need to change and as you are the only one dry will you please fish something for everyone?'

'Coming, coming!' Valkuda was running up the stairs again.

They sat around the table in the cramped kitchen and Stavros poured four glasses of cognac. Tantche lifted an eyebrow but Valkuda shook her head. The psychologist lifted both eyebrows and the newlywed blushed but smiled broadly. Tantche giggled and turned to Tanas 'Congratulations! As we are on the subject, have you selected the name for the little princess?'

'Thank you, and as a future godmother you should know that he is not a princess, he is a knight in shining armor. Yes, he will be Tane and you may tell everyone that we are naming him after you!' Tanas put his ear to Valkuda's flat tummy and grinned. 'Tane says that he had not heard yet what we had been doing in the morning when he and mommy slept.'

The four of them started talking at once. Valkuda put her palms on her ears and pleaded, 'How about Petko starts and you tell me the rest?'

'Well, aside from the fact that I am a formal idiot to go sailing on such an evening, I am an architect in Varna and considered sane by the professionals in the field. Yesterday evening the woman I considered my future wife dropped at my office to tell me some news. She is pregnant, but not to worry, I am not the father and she is getting married at the end of October as the last divorce hearing of the happy future husband and father is scheduled for the twentieth of the month. Instead of like a normal man to go and get properly drunk, break some glasses and wipe my nose, I decided to get a gulp of fresh air. The meteo people professed that it would be windy. I thought I would handle it. "Faith" is old but sturdy, I had the motor checked recently. It was about seven-thirty, by eight-thirty I got it that the old guys were heading to port not because they had caught all the fish in the sea and then my motor coughed and died on me. Nice! Nobody in a yelling distance, Devil Stream under the hull, just peachy! Everybody was heading to safe harbor and I got it that I would have to wait until I bump into someone or I would end at the Turkish border and would be shot by a border patrol. That was not an encouraging thought, but I did not have radio on "Faith" so... It got dark, started raining, the waves were getting higher... I got it that I was actually sinking, as the boat was getting full. No idea where I was by that time, no lights, ripped the door, tied the buoys to it and me to them and the idea was to be on top until the morning or until someone passing finds my skeleton. The most important was

to keep the water out of my mouth and the air in and I managed pretty well I think. At one point it was very bad with the waves and all, although I am born at the sea shore. I remember I was drifting by your cove and saw people, lifted a hand and yelled. I did not see the wave and swallowed it and thought that would be the end. The next thing I was on the beach and Tantche was telling me that it was my lucky day!’

‘What you are missing is that first I had to swim to get to his raft and if Tanas had not followed, I doubt I would have been able to do it alone in time. Then Stavros pulled us all to shore and Tanas squeezed him, we did come CPR and here he is, telling stories.’

‘By the way, you swim like a champ. I had trouble catching up with you and I doubt that town of yours even has a swimming pool! Where did you learn the trade?’

‘I was not born in that town of mine as you call it. I spent my formative years in Varna. Before I decided to get into Medical University, I was considered a rising swimming champion. A trauma, the rest is history; I went first for sports medicine but fell for the psychology professor and followed him into the field.’

‘You still follow him?’ Petko was smiling like a Cheshire Cat.

‘No, it was long ago. Before you say something that you may regret, you have to know that you are spoken for. I was telling these two gentlemen here that a gypsy once upon a time told me that I will fish my man from the sea and I got two today, but Stavros will keep one of them...’

‘What? You want to say you saved TWO men today?’

‘Here is the one I am keeping!’ the old man was shaking with laughter when he put the gold coin on the table. ‘But if Tantche had not liked you, we probably would have tossed you aside and wait for another one to come. She is looking for a blue-eyed, blond, unattached man and you fit the description. Tantche, is the smile to your liking?’

‘Let’s show him the Green Fairy and I will decide.’

‘Who is the Green Fairy?’ Petko looked puzzled.

‘My car. Where is it, by the way, I thought I parked in front?’

‘That you did, but there was a storm as the young man said and we moved it to the barn. You can go and visit. The door is closed by a pin on a rope.’

‘Coming?’ Tantche looked outside to be sure the rain would stay away for another few minutes. Petko followed her without a word.

The barn door opened and in the semi-darkness Tantche's car was fascinating with its lacquered flowers. They would be telling their grandchildren that it had been a love at first sight, Petko thought, then swept the petite blondie and kissed her senseless, or at least that was what she told the same grandchildren many, many years later.

'Stavros, do you think we can bend Father Ivan to marry us in Brashlyan, let say, tomorrow?' Tantche was firmly snuggled in Petko's arms.

'If possible, in the afternoon, I have to get Mom and Dad, as well as my four brothers lined up and one of the guys live in Sofia,' chimed the other blond head.

'It is a pity you don't have a sister to be a matron of honor, Stavros insists that the best man has the right to kiss the matron, but if she is not beautiful, he can skip and nobody will notice.'

'Well, not that my brother is not beautiful, but if Stavros kisses him I bet everybody will notice. I doubt you can do it without a footstool; I am the shortest of the five. And Dad will definitely say something about it and I shake to think what it may be. You see, he shares an occupation with Tantche, gets on everybody's nerves...'

'Repeat that, please! Are you by any chance implying that you have something to do with Professor Saraffov, the famous neurologist Saraffov?'

'What do you mean "something to do with"? I thought that you the doctors knew that I have to share at least one chromosome with my dad. I see he is right, he says all the time that the medical education is suffering, I have to confess I did not trust him on that up to now. But Dad is better than a chromosome, you will like him!'

Another month and another wedding, thought Father Ivan, at least that one was planned or looked like one. He had managed to convince the bride and the groom to postpone it for another two days until Sunday. When in the morning the sleepy Brashlyan was invaded by a column of diverse vehicles, the priest was overwhelmed. The groom's four brothers with their wives and children had brought loads of flowers and ribbons and within the hour the church was resplendent in hundreds of blooms and candles. While the

venerable professor was charming the priest, his wife was fussing with the cloud of white silk that was the gown of her last daughter-in-law. She was discretely wiping her eyes and confiding in Mitzi that the girl who had saved her baby was just an angel inside and out. But even if she would have been a hag with hunchback, one blind eye and hands of different length, it did not matter as she had made her son a happy man again. Mitzi was nodding in agreement, looking at the best man Stavros in black suit talking to the best man Stavri who was a good head and then some taller. Rada had grudgingly apologized to Tantche and even more grudgingly to Valkuda, but for the sake of the wedding, a truce was agreed. Tanas was holding hands with his wife who was radiating happiness and good health, both dressed much more officially than for their own wedding. The church was full with children running and playing hide-and-seek among the carved columns and high chairs. Unexpectedly, Mitzi felt her sadness about Iossif's departure lighten - the flash weddings were more frequent than it was thought and it was her wedding that had brought the crowd at that place and time. Elka had been right - the time was like a fabric, with its folds, stretches and holes. Mitzi knew even what fabric it was - the time was a lace, delicate, spider web thin, yet durable, thousands of lines crisscrossing, twisting around each other, parting ways for few loops or forever and when one line was fading or cut another one was replacing it, lovingly entwined around the departing thread without diminishing the harmony of the whole. Beautiful figurines were woven and the lines were going and going, the spindles clicking melodiously, the hook matching the ones that would otherwise never meet. It took time to see the splendor of the finished part and get a vision to spin the future. Mitzi had reached the point to do both and an eternal calmness enveloped her heart. She would go on like Iossif wanted and do what he had left her as an unfinished business yet she had many people now to take over. She smiled and Tanas looked at her with his grandfather's eyes and smiled in response, then put his hand on Valkuda's belly. Mitzi's smile got wider. She had even more to count on. Stavros' bell tolled and the doors of the church opened to let in the smiling Tantche and Petko.