

Shoes the Color of Sunset

The day was showing the first hints of the future cold days and Nada insisted that the girls put some heavier clothes. They were fast and with some carefully applied make-up Mitzi's face was the same sophisticated young lady's mask that the local beau monde was accustomed to see. Nada took her handbag, secured her purse in her inner pocket and the three of them left the house.

Their first stop was a small shop featuring fine lingerie and Nada was surprised at the rather conservative choice of her charge who paid more attention to the quality rather than the appearance. The elder woman paid the bill and arranged the purchase to be delivered after three to her house. 'Oh, ladies only party!' adoringly exclaimed the salesgirl and Nada smiled, as a legend had presented itself out of the blue.

Mitzi refused having suits tailored, insisting that she had in her suitcase her three basic ones in black, blue and grey. It was wise, as tailors would not be happy with an order to finish the next day, despite the good bonuses. Luckily Mitzi wore a standard size and the purchase of few different chemises of subtle colors was not problematic. Most did not need even fitting and the shop agreed to deliver them after three also. Few different pairs of shoes were the next on route, before the three women decided to stop for a lunch.

'Cake!' the two girls answered in unison to Nada's question what they would need to sustain them for another round of shopping. The mother smiled and decided to indulge. The sun was making breaks through the lightening clouds and she marveled at the swing of the mood, from the morning desperation to the squealing laughter when Mitzi was modeling a particularly frilly chemisette for them. Happiness and laughter were so scarce lately, if they could be prolonged for a little while, she would do whatever it took. In that particular case it was not unpleasant, she smiled again and opened the door of one of the most fashionable pastry shops of the capital.

The pastry shop manager was well aware of the importance of his visitors. Not that he had not been used to celebrities frequenting his shop, but the reclusive wife of a former minister together with their even more

reclusive daughter and the fiancée of the almighty police boss were not to be ignored. He personally went to seat them next to the window and politely mentioned that such jewels adorn his shop's windows much more rarely than he would have liked, enquired about the health of Mr. Mihailov, who surely had been preoccupied at the University to not be able to stop for such a long time, and probably so was Colonel Tashev who did not paid Mitzi as much attention as he probably would like to.

Mitzi smiled at the man. 'Oh, Colonel Tashev left yesterday night for a business trip to Varna. He is so busy, as you said, he won't be back until next Friday, I believe. Meantime, there is so much pleasure to be found with the good people around me!'

Nada was unwillingly impressed. Nothing in Mitzi's cheerful voice would suggest a trace of distress or disrespect; nothing gave away a hint of the morning drama, of the uncertainty that shrouded her life at that very moment. And when had the sunny kid she knew learnt the Aesop's language so well? The answer was perfect for the question, it did not contain a lie, but it was as far from the bare truth as the famous emptiness of the baths. She could not have got it all from the college she had attended with Dora, could she? Nada's thoughts followed the path of her husband's reasoning in the morning. Iossif's sixth sense had been right again, he was seeing something that all people around were missing behind the eminently lovable, cheerful, hare-brained persona that Mitzi was presenting to the general public.

Dora had been telling her that Mitzi was breezing through the most difficult subjects at college with the ease of a hot knife through butter, but her stubbornness in pursuit of an idea or defense of an opinion had not endeared her to the college personnel. Mitzi was the usual source of nicknames for their teachers, which stuck like carpenter glue to the persons, unnerving in their insight sometimes. That had caused a lot of grief to her parents, a pair of relatively well educated people who always appeared awfully snobbish to Nada. They would do anything to get the approval of the crowd they deemed "necessary" or "important" and scoff the rest. Due to the proximity of their apartment to Mihailovs' home Mitzi had spent considerable amount of her childhood with Dora and Vesselin, as her parents loved to drop phrases like: "Oh, you know, when we were at Professor Mihailov's..." or "The Minister agreed with me that ..." even if the agreement concerned the color of tomato soup. That had come handy when the pair had to be convinced to send Mitzi to the expensive college in Istanbul. The father was well paid high-ranking clerk, the mother had brought him a

handsome dowry which had been well invested, so it was not for the lack of money that they objected. Their main concern was that while their studious daughter wasted their money on learning how to be a proper lady, the good eligible bachelors would be all taken. Even if most of the country had given hope that the king's brother would eventually settle, there was still a chance for the right woman, or other good boys were around... Lambri had pointed that the good boys would prefer an educated wife rather than a non-polished diamond, even as beautiful as Mitzi and insisted that it was the only reason he would be sending his daughter abroad. Both girls had managed to avoid the wrong facial expression and after some more ardent discussions on the subject of foreign schools and why it was different for the girls from the boys, the Altinovs had finally conceded.

It was different though when it came to the finishing school in Switzerland. No amount of pleading on behalf of Mitzi or reasoning from anyone else made the Altinovs united front bulge from the position that marriage was more important. Finishing schools gave the young ladies too much new ideas which were not well accepted. Dora had gone and Mitzi had thrown herself in the pursuit of a husband with the same fervor that she did everything. After being introduced to every eligible bachelor in the near and far proximity, she had had her name linked to several of the richest of them, had been known to mercilessly break hearts and be able to dance a night out on the highest hills worn in town. When she finally had settled her choice on the rising star of Tashev, the rest of the prospective brides, as well as their mothers, had let a long-held sigh of relief. The colonel appeared smitten, and probably had been until the night before. Mitzi had used the time to skillfully manipulate the public opinion that they were secretly engaged to be married. Lambri had tried to warn the young woman about the past of her new paramour as delicately as possible, Dora had argued with her that he was a former criminal and possibly present one as well, but both were taken aback by the mixture of hope and despair, love and despise, that had bubbled out of Mitzi one night at the beginning of September. "I wish it was not such a Shakespearean mess!" was the only comment that Lambri had had, and Dora stuck to her promise not to repeat a word of what had been said even to her mother. That had cautioned Nada not to try too hard to talk to her daughter's friend, although she knew her word will be carefully listened to. She regretted that decision now, but it was late to make amends. Better concentrate on...

'Here it is, your cake, Madam!' The manager was standing in front of her with a plate. He served the two other pieces of cake, as well as their teas and retreated. The girls simultaneously dug their forks into the sweet layers and snickered. That was a joke so private that even Nada was excluded, but she did not mind. They were here, they were happy and for the moment she was content with that much.

After they cleared their plates, Nada decided to approach the most delicate subject. Mitzi needed a dress for the wedding. Moreover, it had to be ready in hours rather than months. There was no time to waste.

'Mitzi, lossif said that you have to have the dress of your dreams. I hope your dreams are well defined and you know what we will be looking for, my dear. I will do my best to help, but we have to start as soon as possible the search...'

'Oh, it will be fun, Mitzi, you have always wanted...'. Dora did not finish the sentence, as her friend lifted a finger. Then her smile could rival the one of the famous Louvre lady in her unintelligibility. Mitzi turned to Nada. 'This is not about my dream, it is about Professor Spassov's one. And I have a faint idea of what he might like. But you will first promise that you are not going to laugh, and second, that you will help me make it.'

There were flames in the eyes of the hellion, Nada thought, oh, someone might get burned on them. Or may be only warmed, depending on the person...

'So here is the plan...'

The next half an hour was consecrated to finding deep yellow, high heels pumps which would have been a real chore in November if not for the vast inventory that the nearby Bata shoe store carried year round. The vendor was shaking his grey head that staging a realistic summer-theme based home show did not exactly require such expensive requisite, but nevertheless sent his assistant to the depot and produced the required pair which fitted Mitzi's small feet. Mitzi hugged the box. Dora giggled. Nada and the vendor shook heads in mutual understanding.

The following shop was one of the biggest stores that carried improbable range of dress materials. A person could easily spend a day just in the section of exotic fabrics: the finest organza from India, the almost weightless cotton from Egypt, the intricate designs of the double-side embroidered Chinese heavy silk, the brocades and damasks from France or the gold-threaded shawls from Persia were all neatly folded and carefully displayed in kaleidoscope of nuances.

Numerous drawers contained beads, buckles and all fastenings that one could imagine. A wall was displaying stacked one over the other in neat columns over the multiple shelves, hundreds and hundreds of boxes, to the front of which buttons were sewn, from the cheap Bakelite browns to the mother-of-pearls dress shirts essentials to the sparkling false stones to the natural horn ones and every other form and color between them. Rows after rows displayed fine threads for sewing or embroidery, next to the linen canvases for cross-stitch and several turning displays of needles and pins, from the thinnest needles that would not damage the most delicate silk to the bodkin to go through a mattress. If a seamstress devoted to her art would envisage the paradise on Earth the store came pretty close.

As a patron of several women's societies dealing with orphanages and schools, Nada was a frequent customer and a well loved one at that. She was met with a special hospitality, coming directly from the owner who ordered coffee and invited the ladies in his office. He was a nice man, one of the many sons of famous producer of finest woolen cloths for men's suits, who had started his business in a small town high in the mountains to become known at Savile Row. All his sons were trained into his trade. From the time they could stand high enough to look at the tables where the cloth had been rolled and processed they had worked as apprentices at every position at their father's mills. After that they have chosen how to distribute the load according to their preferences and with their father's blessing had spread the business further. One of them had remained in London to facilitate the trade there, and due to his curiosity, his brother's shop in Sofia could carry almost any fabric produced in the Empire on which the sun never set or at least order it very fast.

The coffee was nice and the pleasantries genuine, and if not for the urgency that the day was frothed with, Nada would have enjoyed a longer stay. She looked pointedly at the merchant and he shook his head. 'Mrs. Mihailova, what can I do for you today?'

'We will need the softest, finest linen that you carry, purest white, as wide as you have. That is one. The next one is deep yellow organza, the brightest egg yoke that you can find and as sheer as possible, no sequins, no gold trims, nothing like a sari, please! The third one is a golden fillet as thin as you have. The fourth will be a yellow linen or woolen cloth to match the organza, something that has soft folds when draped. Of course, matching threads, underlining, and your promise that no one will hear what I need next, Stamat!'

The rotund man chuckled, 'I may not be a doctor, but your secret is safe with me. Name the object and I will secretly bring it here!'

'I need two branches of fleur d'orange. Or better make it three. I will need six separate flowers though apart from the branches. I think that is all.'

'Mrs. Mihailova, you have now my curiosity on top of my undivided attention! May I leave you alone for few minutes!' Stamat left shaking his balding head.

A small box appeared first on his desk, containing the most exquisite wax orange blossoms that money could buy in town. Mitzi inspected them and pronounced the blooms perfect. Stamat smiled contentedly and wrapped the pale bouquet in silk paper before tying the box. Then he led his customers to a cutting table in the middle of the shop where two young assistants were towering roll after roll of fine materials. Mitzi produced her shoes and the three women started mixing and matching the yellow rolls first. Soon the organza and the fine wool were selected and the assistants took away the yellows. Nada put aside several white rolls and asked to remove the rest. Then the assistants unwound few yards of each and Dora draped the fabric for Mitzi and Nada to look from a distance. Several nods and shakes later there was only one long white roll on the table. The last roll to be unwound was much smaller - the golden net was so fine it was weightless to touch. One of the assistants brought the rolls of twisted silk thread to match. Stamat personally cut the cloth to the measurements that Nada gave him and his assistant packed them while Stamat himself calculated the bill on the beautiful engraved cash register. The curiosity was etched all over

him, as the choice of fabrics and size of the cuts were so unusual. And yellow in the beginning of winter, that was strange as well. The fleur d'orange on top of it. The white was not enough for a wedding dress, even for the slender Mitzi who was obviously the center of attention. But he had been in business long enough to ask or give his unsolicited advice to such a valued customer.

The compassion took over Nada's doubts and she decided to humor him.

'Stamat, you belong to the congregation of Sveta Nedelya, aren't you? So if you read carefully the announcements for Sunday, your questions will be answered!' she smiled. 'But remember, I have your word about being mum! Just until Sunday, then you are free of the vow!'

'Ah, Mrs. Mihailova, you are a lady full of secrets! Anytime you need something, you need just to call and I will send it to you at home. And rest assured, I will be silent as grave,' smiled the merchant handing the parcels to Dora and Mitzi. He saw them off and went back to his study to think about the purchase. Something was cooking, he was sure that it was not a Saturday night ball. Last week there were no bans read at the church, he was almost sure, or may be he had not paid enough attention. He thought that he would pass by the next morning to check the message board.

While the ladies were entertaining themselves with shopping, Iossif's agenda was as precise as a military operation plan. After meeting Mr. Altinov, he went straight to Sofia Mitropolite to discuss the nuptials on Sunday. The holy man was so dismayed by the unusual request of his old friend that he forgot the dark clouds clustered over his white head. Trying to explain the urgency, Iossif delicately spared him the news of Mitzi's condition, but Exarch Stefan was not born the previous day. When Iossif pulled the same argument he had used with Nada, that he did not marry often, the old cleric tittered and confirmed that for such a rare occasion he would preside over the ceremony himself. He said that there was no way he would watch from his office across the square, his eyesight was not what it had been. The time was set for 1 p.m. for all the prayers to be finished. Exarch Stefan personally wrote a message to the cathedral's personnel to put the note on the board. He called his private secretary and gave the necessary orders, then offered Iossif to dine with him. It was still early, so Iossif said he would go and arrange something before returning for the simple lunch.

The remaining hour before the meal Iossif spent ordering invitations and flowers. The print shop was sworn to secrecy. As the owners did value the customer whose word carried significant weight at discussions of University orders, they agreed that the cards would be ready by 2 p.m. The glossy white rectangles of the finest English coated paper the shop carried were engraved with a simple message.

*"Mr. Iossif Spassov
and
Miss Maria Altinova, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Velian Altinov,
would like to invite you to their nuptials.
The union will be celebrated on Sunday, November 3rd, 1947,
at Sveta Nedelya Cathedral at 1 p.m.
Best man and Matron of Honor Mr. and Mrs. Lambri Mihailov."*

The last name effectively sealed any possible leak of the gossip lines - offending two influential customers with a breach of trust could cost a business. The owner personally sat down to fold the invitations into their luxury lined envelopes. He did not even have the time to scratch his head over the lack of the customary "R.V.S.P." at the bottom of the form. The clock was ticking, the money in the cash register. Fold-insert-fold-insert-fold-insert...

The florist was even more flabbergasted than the print shop owner was. It was Friday after midday and his famous client needed a church decorated for Sunday morning. The florist was used to the extravagant taste of Professor Spassov who invariably sent flowers to his hostesses if he could not attend a party personally, who never forgot a special date and who was generous with the orders for his own home at the rare cases when he was entertaining. Still a wedding decoration at the beginning of November with less than forty-eight hour notice - that was pretty hard. Even if they called all the roses from all the shops around, that might not be enough. The only alternative were the chrysanthemums. Yet they were yellow! Or, if lucky enough - white, but not many of them. Would the future bride accept the choice? The Professor seemed delighted by the yellow however, so he placed an extraordinary complicated order for the church decoration,

ordered bouquets for the bride and the Matron of Honor, boutonnieres for himself and the best man plus few to spare, all to be delivered on Sunday morning before 10 to his house, paid and departed in the best of spirits. The florist looked at his wristwatch and groaned, then called his assistant to replace him at the shop and personally sat to dial his suppliers. He did not have time to gossip either.

The professor and the mitropolit shared a quiet meal. The lentil soup was simple and delicious, the bread crusty and the company wonderful. There was no noise in the canteen and if not for the faint trembling from a tram passing by, the two friends could have been seated at a monastery in the middle of the forest. Their conversation was equally tranquil; they discussed the relationship between the old cults and the Christian traditions of the early days, what was left untouched, what could be traced and what was lost forever. Even the most careful observer would never guess that these two peaceful-looking old gentlemen were part of a swirling church fight that was going to its maelstrom.

The print shop was as good as its promise and lossif picked up his two small packages. Sometimes *not* having a lot of relatives actually was a blessing rather than a point to complain. He hailed a phaeton and went back home. The professor rang the bell on the front door.

Martha the housekeeper has been taking care of lossif's bachelor home silently and efficiently. They rarely met except on Saturday morning when lossif discussed with her his menu for the week and she presented him the bills. If there was a party to be prepared, she would hire a catering service who would execute the professor's written instructions to the letter, but these were really rare - being a widower of certain age absolved lossif of the hosting necessities. Exception was made for his regular card-playing parties where the gentlemen were serving themselves from the cold buffet Martha prepared. All in all, she counted her blessings about having such a job - she was free to go as soon as she finished cleaning and cooking, and as lossif was unpretentious to his menu and often ate out, it was not much. The cleaning was not a burden either - the house was big, but not lived in, except for his set of rooms on the first floor and his study at the ground level, which opened to a small garden. Martha knew professor's timetable by heart and never disturbed him. She would wait until he was gone for his daily routine before she made noise with the house

chores. Iossif paid her a generous salary that had made possible for her son to go to a good school and she would fight tooth and nail for him, that is, if there was someone to fight with for a nice man like him. So hearing the bell the housekeeper presumed that it was a delivery man and quickly went to open the door.

'Professor!' Martha exclaimed, 'Is everything all right?'

'Yes, Mrs. Vassileva, everything is absolutely fine. In fact, I would like you to come to my study in a minute, but please put these two packages there first.'

The professor went up to his room and the surprised Martha ran to deliver the packages. There was something strange in professor's appearance, she thought, he looked different. It was like he had erased a couple of decades from his age. The housekeeper went to the kitchen to put the kettle for his herbal tea.

Few minutes later Martha heard professor's steps and hurried to his study. It was a bright room originally designed as a sun-room, but with some additions Iossif was using it as a study year round. He was sitting behind his big desk and gallantly asked her to sit at one of the armchairs facing it. Then he dropped the bomb.

'Mrs. Vassileva, I am getting married on Sunday at 1 p.m.'

Martha blinked rapidly several times, but that was the only sign she was alive, not a painting installed in the armchair. Iossif understood.

'Please do not think that I am out of my mind completely. And I apologize that I have not presented the future Mrs. Spassova to you before, but the circumstances are somewhat unusual. I would like first to invite you to the wedding!' Iossif handed the astounded Martha one of the envelopes with her name nicely scrawled over the front. She took it very carefully and pulled the invitation with such a face as if she was afraid the white rectangle would bite her. Martha quickly read the contents and then flashed a quick glance at Iossif, who was looking at her smiling like the cat who drank the milk.

'Yes, that is Mitzi! I hope I can rely on your discretion as always. I need the second floor rooms to be prepared for her for the next Sunday night. We will be going on our honeymoon immediately from the feast, so it will not be necessary anything to be ready for this Sunday. It will be up to her to redecorate the suite later as she likes it, so nothing special need to be done for now. Just to assure that the look is welcoming, flowers, of course, chocolates, I trust you to find something really nice. Yes, I will not be here next week, so

apart from preparing the rooms you will also have some rest. I will be much obliged however, if you prepare a light cold supper for Sunday night.'

The housekeeper recovered her tongue. 'Congratulations, Professor! I hope that Miss Altinova will find the accommodations suitable upon arrival. Will there be any changes in your program until Sunday that will need my involvement?'

'Mrs. Vassileva, there will be no change in my program at all - neither until Sunday nor upon arrival, please do not worry about your position in my household. I am sure my future wife will find your service adequate just like I have found it for so many years. We will see later if we will be entertaining more, then it will be up to you to decide when we need to hire an assistant to you. Miss Altinova is a nice young woman and I sincerely hope you will find common ground soon. I trust you will postpone your judgment upon my change of marital status until the primary surprise is settled a little bit...'

'Professor!' Martha was outraged. 'I would never dare to judge you!'

Iossif grinned cordially, 'So you will be a infinitesimal minority, Mrs. Vassileva! But your loyalty is greatly appreciated, rest assured. Now, I do need your sound judgment - how do I send few invitations around town in the shortest possible time? Do you think that our friend Riste will be inclined to leave his brush and polishing cloth aside, wash his face and hands, and ride a carriage for a change?'

Martha glowed happily - Riste was a nice kid and the professor knew that in the cold days he was taking refuge in his kitchen for a cup of milk and some sustenance. Both Riste the shoe cleaner and Martha were terrified when caught for the first time. Professor Spassov had joked that while he would need more shoes to need a personal shoe valet, he was inclined to hire Riste to help Martha as nobody could polish a loafer like the corner box owner. The young corner box manager had accepted the contract and showed at least once a week to polish every shoe professor owned while chatting with Martha. The boy had already done few deliveries on a very short notice and has proven to be reliable and honest to boot.

'I will go and ask him,' Martha smiled more broadly.

'Thank you, Mrs. Vassileva. Please let him wash and feed him - I will need him in twenty minutes, but he will have a lot of running after that. Oh, he may have my supper - I am dining out tonight!'

'If you insist, Professor!' Martha left smiling at the idea of having Riste sit at the dining room table in front of full battery of silverware and fine china for having professor's supper.

There were several invitations which were going with Riste, but there was one that would have to be addressed personally prior to that. Iossif picked up the phone and asked the secretary of the former prime minister and present minister to connect him with his boss. The request was immediately granted and the deep voice was already laughing:

'I am not playing cards with you; I am not paid well enough for that!

'Old friend, who would ask such a mundane thing when I have a completely different offer to spend your Sunday midday!'

'Sunday midday? Now that is a surprise, what have you fixed for Sunday midday for me? It better be something really extraordinary, otherwise how will I explain to my wife that I will be missing from the Sunday dinner.'

'Oh, it is not only for you, it involves Mrs. Georgieva also!'

'If this is a very complicated way of inviting us for lunch, you could have said so!'

'Not only for lunch, my friend, not only. Now, you are sitting, aren't you?'

'Of course I am sitting! Now let the cat out of the bag!'

'Well, you are cordially invited to my marriage at 1 p.m. at Sveta Nedelya and then to the luncheon at "Balkan" immediately after.'

There was a silence on the other end of the line. Iossif chuckled, 'Say something! Better it be that you are coming!'

'Are you sure that you are not playing with the calendar and yours is open of April 1st?'

'Kimon, I am not joking one iota. You can send your secretary across the road and he can read himself the announcement - it should be on the board already.'

'No, for that announcement, I will go down myself! Congratulations! Who is the lucky lady?'

'Maria Altinova. She is the daughter of one of your employees, by the way.'

'Altinov, you say, Altinov, I can't remember him at the moment...'

'I doubt you will be happy if you would. But I have a favor to ask you. You see, my relationship with my future father-in-law is not exactly peachy. We had a bad start as you might have rightly guessed. So if you

are going to be so gallant to send his family a congratulations note with a confirmation that you will be present at the church, I will gladly chalk off the bets on our next game!’

‘Iossif, for such a generosity on your side, the relationship should be really lower than the sea level,’ crowed the other man. ‘I just cannot pass by such an offer. And Veska will kill me if we are not present anyway, so I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Will you give me the address instead of me running the entire ministry to find him? I presume you do not wish me to go to his office and bring the flowers myself!’

‘No need at all, and he is at home today, you know, Sunday is not so far away!’ Iossif quickly dictated Maria’s address.

‘Now let me know how you managed to be so secret about it, nobody got even an idea that you are tying the knot again! Veska will skin me alive when I tell her!’

‘Ahhh, it is a long story and as always, it is complicated. But if I tell you now, you will tell Veska, she will tell the girls and by tomorrow morning the entire town will know. No, it is still the best guarded secret in town. I will tell you when we play together next time. Please, tell your secretary that my messenger Riste will be coming soon to bring you the paper invitation, he is somewhat unusual kid, so the porter may not let him pass on his own.’

‘Riste, I will remember! Iossif, now that was news, you know! Go run, groom, you sure have a lot to do! We will see you on Sunday and once again, congratulations, I will send flowers for sure.’ The minister was still laughing when he placed the receiver. He rang his secretary immediately. Ten minutes later the man was running to the nearby florist with the minister’s order for a fine basket of expensive flowers and a handwritten note to be attached to it. Passing first by Sveta Nedelya just to have a peek...Iossif could be such a prankster!

A little water and some soap had done wonders to Riste’s appearance. Some good food had held certain charm as well, as in twenty minutes he was almost presentable. Martha had carefully inspected his hands, chapped and red, but clean now, had tried to repair some of the damage with her own bottle of glycerin and lemon juice, had done her best to put some order in his soft light brown hair. He had gingerly brushed his attire, a hand-me-down from someone almost his size, which his mom had meticulously patched up. He was tall for his age, his eyes clear blue pools like the lakes of the mountain he came from. His habit to constantly

read whatever printed material he could put a hand on between his customers had earned him the nickname of "The Academic" among his fellow shoe polishers, but he did not pay much attention to their bugging. He was as calm as that mountain lake he got his eyes' color from, thought Martha, but those lakes were dangerous as the creatures who dwelt in them. Riste needed schooling, but his father was a drunkard that would go through every nickel that his three sons earned and had prohibited his children from even thinking about school. The mother had been beaten into submission long ago and there was no other option for the boy but to do his father bidding. If his old man found him missing during his "inspection rounds", the next day Riste was coming to work beaten blue. He had been a fairly recent addition to the district, before he was trying to establish himself in the center, but the good spots were fiercely guarded.

A formal note informing the Rector of the upcoming change in the professor's marital status and a request for a week-long holiday due to that event were attached to one of the invitations. Several others were destined to various fellow academics, then some requested the presence of his card buddies and their wives, some prominent art galleries' owners, few of the best known hostesses in town and their illustrious husbands, the director of the historic society, and some other cream of the cream community members. Each invitation had an address written on it and a small piece of paper attached with a paperclip with additional instructions how the envelope had to be delivered. Riste listened carefully, then took the bag with the invitations and jumped in the waiting carriage. Iossif paid the driver and asked him to follow all the instructions of his young passenger, then to return him safely, in which case he was promised a hefty bonus. With a theatrical wave of the coach's whip, the journey started.

While sipping the tea and devouring the light meal that Martha had fixed for him, Iossif made few more phone calls. He got the tickets and the reservations done and then asked Martha to wake him up around five-thirty. A good rest was an award for a hard work, he always followed the principle, was his last thought before he dropped asleep.

One of Riste's first stops was just a block away. He rang the bell at Altinovs' apartment several times before the disheveled Mrs. Altinova personally opened the door. Her husband had gone for a walk in the nearby

park, he had said, and no, he did not want for her to accompany him. She should better sit at home and think how to address the shame that was imminent upon their heads. She had not exercised enough control over their flighty daughter while he was sacrificing himself to provide for the family, the good man had said. Mrs. Altinova had tried the usual tactics of injured pride and tears, but her husband has been adamant! And now there was someone with a delivery at the door, who seemed vaguely familiar, but she could not make it up immediately who he was. The boy handed her an envelope and run away so fast, that she did not have the time to open the letter. The front door banged and Mrs. Altinova looked at the envelope again. It was addressed to her and her husband and that gave a perfect excuse to open it without him. She went to the sitting room and found the letter opener in the table drawer. When she read the first two lines, the tool slipped from her clammy hand and cluttered at the floor, unnoticed. Mrs. Altinova dropped in the first chair she could reach. She thought about fainting, but the cleaning lady was not coming on Fridays and her husband was not there, so it would be a wasted effort. While she contemplated her further actions, the door bell rang again.

Convinced that it would be Mr. Altinov, the good wife smoothed her hair, lifted her chin and went to open the door again. This time she was facing an exquisite basket of flowers, carried by uniformed shop assistant. He politely assured her that the delivery had been paid for and also run away before she spotted the business card envelope attached to the flower' arrangement. She put the basket on the sitting room table and her first thought was that it had cost someone a small fortune. This time the envelope was addressed to her husband and she did not dare to open it despite the curiosity gnawing on her insides. Mrs. Altinova was still staring at the basket, when the door bell chimed.

'We will damn soon need a porter!' she muttered and went to open the door. This time it was Mr. Altinov who had forgotten his keys.

Before he could open his mouth, his better half spoke. 'We got an invitation to Mitzi's wedding and someone already sent flowers! They look expensive!'

'What! Show it!' The family head forgot all his good manners and shook the shoulders of Mrs. Altinova. She pulled him by his sleeve to the sitting room and promptly dropped on the same chair she was contemplating

to faint on. She took the morning paper and started fanning herself with it, although the room was not hot.

Mr. Altinov read the card twice, with every moment his face turning a deeper shade of pickled beet.

'How does he dare, the old coot, to put my name on his filthy invitations? He will pay for that! Get me the phone book - he is bound to be there! I will go and throw it in his face, and then I will think what to do with that good-for-nothing daughter of yours when she comes back! What does he imagine - that I will show at the church on Sunday and he will laugh that I took the bait of his charade? He wants to make me a laughing stock, but he will see! Phone book, I said, and don't even think of fainting as I am not buying it anyway!'

'What about the basket? There is a note also!'

Mr. Altinov pulled forcefully the little white envelope and almost tore it in half. He shook off its content and at the site of the state coat of arms his face lost the entire color that it had exhibited seconds ago. He pieced together the little business card, read the name and groaned. Then he turned the card to read the personal note and his groan turned into a howl. Mrs. Altinova was plain scared - what was on the card? She looked at her husband who was shaking his head in mute expression that she could not understand and dashed to bring some cold water from the kitchen. When she returned, Mr. Altinov was plopped in the chair she had vacated, still shaking his head. He gulped the water, dried his mouth with the back of his hand and tried to speak.

'Who brought it?' he croaked.

'A guy from a florist shop, I think, he had a uniform and said it was paid for. What is it?'

'The minister had received the invitation, sends congratulations and confirms his attendance on Sunday with his wife.'

'The minister? The one that you work for? Oh, no, now the entire ministry will know by Monday midday!'

'May be they know already... What shall I do? Call and tell him some crazy father is playing sick jokes? Return the flowers? I will kill her; I will screw her neck myself for doing that to me!'

'Wait a little, may be the minister knows the father to accept so easily. Wait; let us think a little bit. Mitzi, did she tell us that she is not getting married?'

'She said the father of the baby does not want to get married. I thought that she meant Mikhail Tashev, but he may not be the only one, damn her!'

'Maybe he thought over?'

'But the name is Spassov and today in the morning a man came and said he wanted to talk about her...'

'And?'

'I told him I don't have a daughter any more!' Mr. Altinov thrust forward his chest, trying to look like King Lear. He lacked the beard.

'And you did not ask him who he was and what he wanted?' Mrs. Illinova's gestures vented her outrage.

'He said he wanted to invite me to Mitzi's wedding, but I did not let him talk rubbish. He said that I will get the invitation by courier. So that crazy man was serious, you want to tell me?'

'Looks like he was. But who was he?'

'I don't know him, but the face looked familiar. Maybe he lives somewhere close, or is well known. I could not see him properly... But he looked older than her, I thought he was a father who wanted to tell me what a jewel had come to his door and what she had brought...'

'You always think bad things first, what is the problem if he is old, if he marries her in her condition! You should have talked to the man! Now what shall we do?'

'We have to find out whether there will be a wedding on Sunday, of course. Sveta Nedelia is not so far away. I will take a carriage, go there, look at the board and we will see. If it is not on the board, I will go and ask the deacon. If he says there is no wedding, I will go find this Spassov before anything else.'

'And what if there is?'

'We will talk later. Don't open the door to anyone, you hear me, anyone!'

Mr. Altinov gripped his purse, checked its contents and run to the street. He forgot about his keys again.

Mrs. Altinova did not remember about them either, as she was busy shaking her head.

Forty minutes later Mr. Altinov was beating at his apartment door with the force of his unspent rage. It took several minutes before his wife came to open and he had been a subject of several inquiries from the neighbors who poked their heads and offered him to stay with them until she returned. It had taken him his last few drops of strength to be civil with the good-natured old people. Finally the entrance to his castle was granted and he threw away the mask of propriety as soon as the door shut.

'What were you doing that was so important to not open the door?' he yelled.

'But you said not to open to anybody! I think you can use your keys!' yelled his better half back.

'It was not to let anybody else in, not me, idiot woman!'

'And how is the idiot woman supposed to know who is banging?' hissed she.

'Anyway, it is not important! The important one is that there is a note at the board. And it says what the invitation says.'

'So it is for real?'

'I doubt anyone will go so far with a dumb joke. It takes money, time and efforts to do that. Most probably Mitzi has been pulling our leg for a long time, and I can't fathom why the spectacle in the morning. Have you heard of this Spassov?'

'I am not quite sure, but I think the reclusive professor that is in the house next to Mihailovs is named Spassov. I think he teaches at the University and Nada is very fond of him, but he is almost as old as the Roman Basilica. I don't know for sure though, I have never met him.'

'So if he is university professor, how does he know the minister?'

'No idea, but he may not be the same one, Spassov is such a common name.'

'Fetch the phone book, if we are lucky, he will be there.'

Mrs. Altinova brought the thin volume and her husband was leafing through it with shaking hands. He traced the column of Spassov-s until in the middle his finger stopped like glued. The entry was solid black on white.

"Spassov, Iossif (Prof.)"

Phone number and address followed. The house was virtually in their back yard. It was real. The question was what to do from there on.

Shopping may have been fun for a while, but it was sapping on Nada's strength. After the cloth store, the girls looked at each other and Dora suggested that they had all that needed to be bought in a day, so how about returning home. Nada sighed in relief and by the end of the sigh, Mitzi had hailed a carriage. Once at home, the two young ladies assured the lady of the house that they would take care of the upcoming deliveries and she should rest for the evening out. She refused their offer for a drink or a snack and retired to her room, grateful to be able to lift her legs that were swollen dramatically. Despite the tingling pain, she smiled - the day was so unusual and the coming ones were doomed to be interesting as well. Yes, the ancient Chinese considered the wish to live during interesting times a curse, but the mortals could not

choose. Better help the kids grab what little crumbs of happiness they could find here and now like the sparrows under the window, instead for spoiling everything by dreading the upcoming winter. Nada felt the winter coming, not the season that made her bones ache, but the winter of the human time. It was not a foreboding that she liked, but she was honest. The first squalls had ripped away some of the strongest trees, it was the mid-forest that was groaning and the bush was trying to shelter the few who dared to stay and try to survive. That particular winter would be harsh, Nada thought, and many of them would not see the spring after. Then she thought about the fate of the ones that would and was perplexed to catch herself fearing that their lot might not be the better one. Nada shook herself from the grim foreboding and tried to smile. There was a wedding to arrange and attend in forty-six hours and she was the matron of honor.

The future bride and her friend were engulfed in frantic activity. They commandeered Lambri's study in order not to drag his heavy illustrated volumes around the house and started leafing fast through them under the nagging of the common sense which was cautioning that the books were fragile. Several times the door bell rang and Dora went to collect their purchases, but the boxes were unceremoniously dropped unopened in the drawing room. Finally Mitzi squealed in delight at the photo that depicted an ancient priestess's statue.

'This is it! Are you sure you can copy the hairstyle?'

Dora looked at the picture and shook her head:

'It does not look that complicated. If I cannot, Mom does wonders with long hair and your one is beautiful!'

'Thank you, your is not bad either! Do we have time to start on the dress now?'

'I don't think we will do much before Dad comes, but we have the entire day tomorrow. Mom will probably want to take part in it too.'

'Well, then let's clean up here and go to your room to try on what we bought.'

Lambri arrived in the middle of the process of returning books to their respective shelves. If he was curious about the two young women and their pursuit of knowledge from his Roman history books, he did not show it. He was glad they were back and asked few casual questions about their shopping success. Assured that his wife was resting and the shopping had not been too taxing on their delicate psyche, he went to see Nada

and the girls went to prepare him some light meal. Vesselin came back from the University and joined them in the kitchen.

Not that Mitzi was an unknown commodity in Mihailovs family kitchen, or exactly because she was there fairly often, Dora's brother could guess something unusual. The glances exchanged between the two girls, the gestures, even the tone of their voices was different. He decided to cut straight the chase. 'Unless it is strictly between the two of you, is something cooking that I have to be aware of?'

'But of course, Mr. Mihailov, you can see that something is cooking!' Mitzi comically rolled her eyes to the small pot on the stove.

'And you can smell it in the air, little brother!' teased his sister.

'The two of you are incorrigible! You know what I am talking about!'

'Don't worry, everything in a due time. First we will feed you and we will talk later!' Dora was concentrating on slicing some tomatoes. Mitzi was waiting with a cube of feta and a grinder in hand. Vesselin sighed. There were few people he knew who were more stubborn than his sister, and unfortunately her college friend was one of them. If he wanted information, he better ate and be patient.

At the sight of Nada sleeping, Lambri smiled into his moustaches but did not disturb her rest and went down to join the young group at the kitchen. He opted to have his meal there despite the protests of the girls who offered maid service for the dining room. He had seen the sparks of smiles in their eyes and was afraid that the meal will be a theatrical sketch. They remained at the kitchen, the girls with a glass of water in hand, serving him and Vesselin their simple meal. While the men ate silently, the young ladies entertained them with a detailed account on the shopping spree. It was a zestful one, the girls playing the roles of the reluctant customer and insistent vendor, the mother-daughter interactions, the arguments over the last tendencies of the world fashion with such gusto, that even Lambri, who was as far enough from ladies frills as one could imagine, caught himself laughing. He caught himself on one more thing - he was detecting in Mitzi trends that he had overlooked before. The young woman had more in common with Iossif than anyone would have thought. She was not bitter - although at this round the Fate had dealt her dismal cards, she had not despaired, she had collected herself enough to accept and chose to play it right. She was careful not to

overstep the boundaries of the bon ton. Although very close to the fine line, her quick comments were astonishingly right to be insulting. Mitzi did not laugh at the person, but at a certain trait of that person and always had something good to say. Lambri felt how the slight unease of his morning decision was clearing away like morning mist under sunshine. Iossif would be in good hands and Mitzi too. Life was sorting itself, as it should be. He treated himself to another helping of the sheppard's salad.

'Oh, Dad, when we are talking shopping, may be Vesselin will need a new suit for Sunday?'

'And why should I need a new suit for Sunday?'

'As Mom and Dad are the best man and the matron of honor at a wedding.'

'Wait a little, I have not heard that we are invited to a wedding!'

'It was decided today.'

'Ample amount of time to prepare, I see. And whose wedding it will be?'

'Mine!'

'Mitzi, that is not serious! You are not marrying that man, even if I have to tie you!'

'Calm down, you will not need to tie me down. I am not marrying Mikhail!'

'But you were dating the creep for ages!'

'Don't rub it in, please, at least not you! I know I deserve it, but, please!'

'All right, all right, I won't but will anyone fill me in what is going on?'

'Well, son, you see, Mitzi came today and she had had argument with her parents and a very nice man offered her a hand, so she accepted.'

'Dad, she does not need to marry just because she argued with her parents!'

Mitzi looked pleadingly at the elder Mihailov. He smoothed back his gray hair with both hands and sighed at her.

'May I break him the news, please, I think he better hear it from me.'

'Go ahead!'

'Vesselin, please, listen before you judge! I am pregnant!'

The young man blanched then turned crimson. Mitzi's face color mirrored his.

'I know it is not decent, believe me, but it happened, so I can't undo it. Or, I don't want to kill the little one, it is not fair thing to do, even if its parents are not the best. Yesterday night I spoke to Mikhail and he said that I am trying to trap him, that he is not going to the church just because, well, you can imagine the rest.'

'Sure I can! But you can do to his bosses and they will press him to do the right thing or it will ruin his career!'

'I am not sure you imagine his bosses correctly,' Mitzi's voice was blank, 'and probably he would have taken care of me before I get within a nautical mile from them. Anyway, it is not an option. Today in the morning I talked to my father and he threw me out, gave me ten minutes to get out of his life, and that was too much, he said. I did not know what to do, so I came to talk to Dora. Professor Spassov overheard the conversation and offered to save a damsel in distress, as he politely put it, and acknowledge the child. I could not even dream about such a solution, but it seems the best for everyone at the moment. I will do as much as I can for him not to regret it. The wedding is on Sunday and your mom and dad were so kind to accept his offer. They also offered to shelter me for tonight and tomorrow, I hope you don't find the idea completely appalling.'

The young man was floored. Mitzi, the same Mitzi with whom he had been playing in the back yard, was pregnant and getting married! It did not happen in real life, it was only in the novels for little house maids, the ones printed with palm trees and fainting beauties on the front cover. Then he remembered about Dora. The situation was completely different, of course, but his sister was also praying for a new life without the man who created it, so who was he to judge one over the other. Vesselin met his father's steady gaze and squared his shoulders. 'Oh, if this is the case, I need to go and get you a wedding present! You remember that bucket with the red ball on the side and the shovel with it? I promised you that I will give it to you if you marry me, but under the circumstances I will make an exception and give it to you anyway!'

All the statement was recited in such a serious manner that it took few instants before the meaning of his words reached everyone. Lambri was the first to grasp it and his laughter rambled around the narrow kitchen, the harmonious tones of the two ladies' voices intertwining and then Vesselin burst in with his deep chuckle. He was still laughing when he went to answer the door bell.

The door opened to frame a grinning Iossif, holding a package.

'You are definitely having a good time, the entire neighborhood can attest to that! Am I invited to join the party?'

'Godfather, you are always welcome. Please accept my best wishes. I would never forgive you for stealing Mitzi under my nose, but she refused to marry me even when I was five.'

'I am glad, son, I snatched her first, now lead the troops!'

Vesselin let the professor in the sitting room and went to summon the rest of the laughing group. They came and said their hellos, then sat around the coffee table. Iossif unpacked the bundle and handed it to Mitzi. She took the stack of envelopes, opened the first one and her eyes swam in tears. She looked at Iossif and whispered, 'Thank you! May I keep one?'

'Oh, child, they are all yours, I have already sent mine. By the way, your father's top boss promised to send Mr. Altinov flowers and a confirmation that he will attend. There is no way to check if he did, but he is decent enough when playing cards, I presume we can rely on him.'

'Iossif, you invited Kimon and he accepted?'

'I had to bribe him promising I will chalk off his card debt next time we play.'

The two men snickered, but the young generation had no idea what sums were involved, so it did not make much difference to them. Mitzi handed an envelope each to Dora and Vesselin, but Lambri shook his head,

'I am going to stand right behind Iossif and he will probably pick me up anyway. I am not going to need one.'

'Well, you are right about that, and there are few more things to know. First, Mitzi and I are going on a honeymoon right in the middle of the reception, which will be at "Balkan", right after the wedding. As it is a surprise, I will leave the contacts with Martha and she will give them to you on Monday. Mitzi, you will need to pack for a milder, but more humid climate, you will need at least one evening dress, but we may procure it at our destination upon arrival. Second, Mitzi, I will need the measurement of your ring finger for the bands. If you like surprises, you will wait until Sunday, if not, you are welcome to come with me tomorrow and choose your own.'

'I would like you to choose it, if I am not imposing,' smiled Mitzi, sliding her thin gold ring with microscopic chip of a diamond from her finger. She put it on Iossif's palm, he took his handkerchief and made a show of tying it to one of the corners. That made everyone smile and at that point Nada entered, looking refreshed.

'Did I miss something?' she motioned to the men not to stand up.

'Not exactly, my dear matron! I don't think I will even try my luck asking whether you found the perfect dress for Sunday, but I hope you did, or if not - you still have tomorrow.'

'Rest assured, the dress will bewilder you!' Nada was enjoying herself at the thought of what lossif would say of Mitzi's idea, she was motherly pleased by her charge.

'Then all that remains for today is to go and have a dinner at "Union". I had not have time to visit my precious doctor at the hospital, so Mitzi, would you please take an invitation for him. I will leave you to your own devices and will see you there in an hour and a half.' lossif stood, then turned again to Nada. 'Do you know your program for tomorrow?'

'Absolutely. None of us the girls is leaving the house. And any male is banned from the second floor without a special invitation between nine and when we declare that we are done. Yes, that includes you, son!'

The old professor was all smiles. 'Then I may come to the first floor and present my bride with her engagement ring, you will not mind?'

'When was the last time you needed an permission to visit us, lossif?' Lambri rumbled laughingly.