

Crowns

It took more than the five minutes initially granted but when Stavros came back from the pen Tanas was dressed in a new shirt and Valkuda was in her green sundress, her hair in a neat plate pinned around her head.

'I had a serious talk with Gantcho the rooster. He could fly around as much as he wants but he is not trying indecent things with your red car, no matter how small he sees it! I would not like small Volkswagens flying around and pecking at the curious villagers. It may upset them. Will you pass me that butter, young lady?'

'Stavros, how would you like to be our best man?' Tanas asked casually spreading some honey on his buttered piece of bread.

'I understand your impatience but let's go after breakfast at least!' the old man chortled. 'I doubt that dress of yours is still usable so maybe it will make the early afternoon.'

'The license will take at least few days,' cautioned Valkuda.

'Not everywhere, young lady, not everywhere. Like in that Brashlyan that you were at yesterday, Father Ivan will procure me one in half an hour! We will go there!'

'Why do you think he will? He almost married her to my brother only yesterday!'

'Even better. He needs to cross over third of the name and not even fill the forms again. And he will, trust me. Last year the church bell unexpectedly broke the yoke that was supporting it and plunged to the ground. It did not fare well as you may guess. Very bad sign, to be without a bell before the Saint Konstantin and Elena's day and Father Ivan came here with the pieces. I had not poured a big bell in a long time and thought to refuse but he was very insistent and said he would provide whatever help I may need. So I restored the bell to his almost original sound but it took me three weeks of bloody work. The last week I did not sleep for more than few hours at a time, but when I broke the mold, I knew it was perfect. It almost did not need scraping and it sounds just a little bit higher as Father Ivan brought some real gold to add for the missing particles. And he brought a parchment to put into the metal, said he had written the history that the

bell had to remember. But he said he owed me one big one! It is time to go and claim my due. Finish your breakfast and let us hop in that red iron water horse of yours.'

Valkuda was listening to the story but her gaze was on Tanas. He was like a child who had just opened his Christmas presents and had found the red fire truck that he had dreamed about together with the toy soldiers that he had written to Santa to bring him last year. He was smiling and when he did that he was so much like his grandfather. Her heart ached for the old man who had spent the last years of his life in a bitter resentment of his grandson and had never looked past the obvious, had never seen him for who he actually was and not as his father's mirror image. They could have found a common ground to step on and maybe Dimitar would have been less pressed after their grandfather's death if the two brothers had shared the pull. But beyond that laid the immeasurable solitude that Tanas Sr. had spent his life in, the vast uncharted plains of loneliness that he had walked all by himself - part out of choice, part out of destiny. Her grandfather had pitied him for that as he said the joy expanded and the sorrow lessened if shared and if not the joy would dim and the sorrow sharpen and its cutting edges would scar the soul with wounds that would not heal. The young woman looked in the black eyes and knew that she had found the man to share the life with. It had been a tormenting journey but every bee sting made the honey taste better, Tane had insisted. Tanas bended to her and she got a taste of the honey on his lips before he asked 'Shall we take the best man upon his offer, love?'

'We definitely shall - we have wasted so much time already!'

'Then you must eat this breakfast instead of looking at it and then we will jump into the beetle and go buy rings on the road. If we find a dress that you like you will have it. I will be glad to marry you draped in burlap sac if that is the only thing available to be presentable at church. I have to warn you, I don't have a suit, everything is in Varna.'

'If I wanted to marry a suit I would run a men's garments department store. And you promised that I can rip the next shirt off you anyway, so don't bother.' Valkuda bit into her cheese and tomato sandwich.

'Wow, if I were you I would switch to T-shirts. Otherwise the next year you will have to gather plastic button trees' harvest if this young lady will continue to saw them around. Don't bother about the rings, that is why you have a best man...'

Stavros stood up and winced a little but steadily went to the door. There he unexpectedly hit one of the planks that lined the kitchen and it cracked. To the surprise of the young couple he pulled out of the hole a small rusty tin that had a picture of a round plump red tomato on it. The tin was no more than two inches in diameter and its lid had been pried half opened. Stavros pulled it up and took from there a crumpled waxy paper. He brought it to the table and opened it.

On the kitchen cloth laid two wedding bands and a ring. The wedding band that was bigger had been fit for a man with very large hands as the band's diameter surpassed almost twice the smaller one's. The ring was ancient - a bright green stone tablet the size of a dime with some Arabic engraving and an intricate carving along the edges. Its bezel consisted of minuscule balls and seemed solidly mounted until Stavros held the ring tight and pushed the stone in. Two of the balls sunk into the rim immediately under and the stone turned over to reveal a sharp peak that was otherwise hidden in the high crown. With a faint click the stone set and the ring looked like a minuscule mountain peak. Stavros took his glass and circled a small section with the tip of the stone. He tapped on the piece inside the white line and it fell into the glass. The old man laughed without a sound and turned the stone back to the original tablet on top. He took Valkuda's hand, put the ring on her palm and closed her fingers over it.

'Your grandfather refused to take it once. I hope you will not refuse and I would have paid my final debt, my dear!' There were tears on his faded cheeks. Then he took the two wedding bands and handed them to Tanas.

'I think they may not need a lot of adjustments even! Let us clean up and go, the day is growing hot...'

'I am more or less sure why your radio does not work,' Tanas was stretching in front of the only bridal boutique for miles around. 'I am positive I don't need it as my knees were firmly pressing my ears and I could not have heard anything anyway. But I must admit it runs well. Stavros, do you need any help to unfold from that back seat?'

'If you promise not to be long I would prefer not to unfold at all. You have parked me in a shadow, should be fine for ten minutes! Off you go!'

Valkuda and Tanas went in hand in hand and the two ladies behind the counter almost sprang on them.

'Oh, but it is a bad luck to see your bride in her dress before the wedding day!' the elder chimed.

'But you probably have a long time before that so may be it will not matter!' the younger seconded.

The bride and the groom burst laughing and said in unison 'Ten minutes, shoes included, ladies!'

Tanas looked at the two pairs of startled eyes and dropped jaws and added, 'I would also like to make use of the ironing services of this establishment, please!'

While the younger vendor was carefully pressing Tanas' silk shirt, her elder colleague was having her ten minutes of horror. Valkuda was going through the racks with the determination of a tornado.

'Scrap the trains, any trains! OK, no long sleeves either. This dress does not have a back as far as I can see. Well, I like spaghetti straps but these were boiled last week and are already curling. Tanas, stop laughing, you are not helping!'

He was grinning at her and pointing at something behind her back. She turned and saw a pale green cocktail dress, absolutely plain green except for a narrow band of dark green velvet on top of the open bodice that ended up in a bow with two long flowing ends on the back.

'What is that?'

'A bridesmaid dress, we made it for a lady that was going to a marriage abroad. They sent us the materials and all. Then she came before leaving for the party and she was pregnant and could not fit at all, so she left with another dress and this one was left for sale. But it is green like grass, not very bridal color!'

"I will try it!" Valkuda was unzipping it and pulling the few stick pins that were holding it to the mannequin.

Few moments later she emerged from the fitting room and tossed the dress into the dazzled vendor's arms.

'Please pack it, but not tight, I will need it today! I will go and pay in the meantime.' she rattled the price tag and left for the front of the shop where the younger seller was standing clutching a hanger with Tanas' shirt.

'D-do you want to try the shoes also?' the younger girl stammered.

'Oh, it comes with shoes? What size we are talking about?'

'One moment, please!'

The girl disappeared in the storage room and came back with a box on which someone had written with a thick black marker "Green pumps – Violeta". Inside a pair of really pretty custom made pumps was stuffed with paper to keep their form as pristine as on the day the cobbler had stretched the green silk on them and

rimmed them with the green velvet. They were a size bigger than Valkuda's shoes but Tanas insisted, 'Take them Cinderella; I will carry you if you feel tired of dragging them around!'

'I may take you upon this one, be careful!' Valkuda dived in her handbag for her purse, but Tanas stopped her.

'No, it is the groom that pays for the bride's dress! Allow me!'

Despite stopping to purchase wine and bread and two spare Jeep tires that were tied on the top of the beetle they reached Brashlyan before ten. Tanas parked in front of Konstantin's house and looked at Valkuda.

'Are you sure we will be welcomed, love?'

'One way or another I have to restore Rada's Jeep tires. You may say you are just for the loading!'

She was speaking much more bravely than she felt. It was less than a day that all the people inside had gathered to see her marry Dimitar who has been a friend to some of them for long. How would they react when she showed in tow with the guy they have helped put in the madhouse a month ago? She did not have much time to dwell on that as the small side door flew open and Iossif came out running. He reached the red car and patted it like one would pat a horse.

'It is nice. Will you let me ride with you?'

'Only if I am present, young man! Otherwise you may steal my bride and ride with her into the sunset! How about a chocolate before that?'

Iossif giggled unperturbed by the tall man towering over him. He looked into his face and said 'I cannot steal your bride! Mitzi promised to marry me when I grow up and you can marry once only!'

'You are right about "once only"! If you are not after my bride then you may show me where to put these two tires that are for another red car, please.' Tanas was untying the heavy wheels.

'It is in the yard but it has new wheels...'

'Wheels are like shoes, one never has enough good ones. Will you hold the door for me, please?'

Konstantin stood in the middle of the yard, glaring.

'I can't remember inviting you here. Your last visit does not hold exactly happy memories.'

'I apologize although for me it does not hold any memories at all. I am only delivering what my fiancée destroyed yesterday and I will be out of your hair immediately. Where shall I put these?'

There was no answer. Konstantin was desperately trying to assimilate the word "fiancée". He touched his ears to be sure they are at their respective places and thought that he had been hearing things that were non-existent. 'The Jeep is over there, but we already got replacement tires. Better put them on the side.'

'What is going on?' Rada came frowning. 'Any trouble?'

'No, Mr. Tanassov was about to leave. He was so kind to bring you two tires in replacement to the ones Valkuda shot yesterday.' Konstantin squeezed his wife's hand. Her frown deepened.

'Where is Valkuda?'

'Here I am,' the object of Rada's concern waltzed in the yard brimming with happiness and stood next to Tanas.

'You did not need to come for the tires but thank you!' Rada rushed to hug her and whispered in her year,

'Do you need any help?'

'Indeed I do! We brought a best man but I still need a matron of honor...'

'What?'

Mitzi, Riste and Vera had come outside and were looking with surprise at the tall man standing next to the woman who had been Dimitar's bride the day before.

'If Stavros manages to convince Father Ivan to marry us today, I will need a matron of honor for today, if not for whenever the license will be ready.'

'So I can still bring the crowns, can't I, Mitzi?' Iossif did not seem upset by the change of groom. Mitzi ruffled his black hair 'We have to ask Father Ivan about it!'

The door opened and Father Ivan came with Stavros. The cleric looked ashen and harassed. 'Stavros, it is ridiculous! I cannot simply pencil his name over! Well, I can, but it is not reasonable. The girl obviously had her mind screwed! She was supposed to marry yesterday his brother!'

'Yes, but she did not marry his brother and her head is in exactly the right place as well as her heart! So, in your own words, "I know you will do the right thing even if you hate to do it at the moment!" You said so last year, you remember!'

'I know we have to eat our words some day or another!' the priest sighed. 'Listen, Stavros, if you find here two people who are not opposed to this marriage, I will marry them!' Father Ivan felt on a safer ground. Konstantin and Rada were glaring at Tanas, Mitzi, Riste and Vera were shaking their heads in disbelief. The door swung open and Vantche and Tantche came in after their visit to the beach. They looked surprised at the group; Vantche put down the beach bag and asked, 'Will someone enlighten us about what is going on?' 'You see, young lady, I brought this couple to Father Ivan to marry and he wants me to produce two people who are not against,' shrugged his shoulders Stavros. 'It seems however that I am in dire zeitnot as I asked for him to marry them today...'

Tantche looked at Valkuda and Tanas' protective arm over her shoulder, the old man who had put them all in a pat situation with two sentences, at the expectant lossif and laughed, tossed her curls back and laughed into the sky. She went to the old man and lilted 'You need only one more to find - I will stand by you on this! They deserve their crowns!'

'Then I will bear the crowns! I will be very careful! Please!' lossif run and held Tantche's hand.

'Of course you will, my dear, we cannot find a better boy for it if we try!' she hugged him and buried her laughing face in his spiky hair.

'You see, Father, I have my two people - now you have no way out! Come on, we can go right now and they will dress and come after us. I want to see how you have hung the bell.' Stavros then turned to Tantche and bowed slightly. 'Your clever mind is surpassed only by your kind heart and it will be rewarded, mark my word!'

'What is a "mark my word"?' asked lossif.

'That is if you want someone to remember what you said. Now let us go and get dressed, we have to make hey while the sun shines.'

'Green Fairy's horses do not eat hay!' lossif giggled without releasing her hand.

'It is also a saying; it means to do something timely, like getting you in a clean shirt. This one is decorated with blackberry stains.'

'We cannot stop them, Rada!' Konstantin was repeating for an umpteenth time. She did not seem to hear him, furiously pressing the buttons of her cell phone. Dimitar was not answering and his Varna's office suggested to her to try Sofia instead. He had not been there either. She was running out of options.

'Tantche said it will be fine in a long run.'

'And since when Tsvetana has the last say about everything related to the human nature? She is still single as far as I know.'

'Low blow,' Tantche sauntered in neatly dressed in her dramatic sea-blue sundress. 'I came to pick up lossif if none of you plans to attend, by the way.'

'If lossif is coming, I am coming also although I am not sure I approve on this haste,' interjected Mitzi who was also dressed up.

'Wait for me!' came lossif's ringing voice and they heard his enthusiastic jumps down the stairs. He had put some efforts to put his hair back and Mitzi's eyes filled with tears. His hairstyle would be looking exactly like that when he would be almost eighty and he would offer her to marry him in earnest, but her hair would be black like his at the moment and he would be as gray as she presently was. She was the one to talk about haste!

'Let us go, we may need to help Father Ivan,' she wiped her eyes and took his little hand. Tantche followed suit.

The bell master was smiling at the blondie next to him and they crossed the crowns over the newlyweds' heads. Tanas had to bend for petite Tantche to reach his head and lossif could not suppress a giggle. Stavros winked at him 'It is the best to be the best man; you are allowed to kiss the matron of honor if she is beautiful.'

'This one is beautiful, but if she was not?'

'Then you can skip and no one will notice...'

The church was empty Mitzi and lossif being the only guests. As Stavros had ringed the bell several times to test how it sounded at its place, the village had not taken notice of Father Ivan's later summons. Tanas and Valkuda could not be happier about it. When it was over and they have signed the register and Father Ivan had given them grudgingly their civil marriage certificate and their certificate of holy matrimony, Tanas

hugged her and kissed Valkuda. He tasted of wine and bread and himself. Valkuda licked her lips and thought that all she ever wanted was him. The rest would somehow arrange itself. She looked at the tall man and pointed at her green shoes 'You said that you will carry me when I am tired of dragging these around...'

He swept her in his arms and confided at Father Ivan. 'These shoes do come handy!'

The priest heard the sparks in his voice and felt marginally better.

The wedding party of six came out of the church and stood at the wide stone steps. Tanas quickly kissed his wife and asked, 'Where would you like to head now?'

'Well, after you put me down it will be almost lunch time, we can go and find a place to eat and then we will decide,' Valkuda felt free for not having a plan. lossif tugged at the long ends of her bow and she turned to him.

'May I ride with you? Tanas said I can come if I am not going to steal you. Mitzi will come with us if he is afraid.'

The groom squatted in front of the boy. He looked into the expectant face and assured him, 'I am not afraid anymore. Valkuda is my wife now and it is forever. You see her rings? This is like a mark that we belong to each other. We will need only to sort the question of who will be riding with whom and we will go.'

'So it is written on her ring that she belongs to you? May I see it?' lossif was a ball of curiosity. Valkuda extended her hand and the child started reading the Arabic flowing lines. He was going letter by letter and carefully forming words. The adults were looking at him, stark disbelief etched over their faces. Mitzi bended over the ring as well, but even if she understood the words that lossif was reading in Turkish, she was not able to read the chiseled Arabic letters. Of course, lossif was born long before the reform of 1928 when the Roman alphabet had replaced the ancient graceful script, and that was what his mother had taught him. "...she taught me to read Bulgarian on the Bible and Turkish on the few books she had, and to write on a tray with sand," lossif had told her in that dismal February of 1948. She could see - the little finger was copying the intricate spelling on the invisible sand and reading "What ... liberated ... you ... set... you... prisoner... what ... chained... you ... let ... you ... free." She repeated the phrase in Bulgarian and lossif frowned. 'I don't understand it, it is like the Qur'an but I don't know it yet, Mom will teach me later!'

Tantche saw the emotions flooding Mitzi, coughed and then cheerfully announced 'Who runs first to the car gets a ride in it!'

Iossif bolted for the red Beetle and Tanas offered his hand to Mitzi to steady the swaying elder woman.

'I think the best idea is to make a small circle with Iossif around the village and then go. We will have dinner some other time. It had been stressful later. Mitzi and Iossif need to rest, otherwise he will get hyperactive. Vantche and I have to go, as we planned to pass by Sofia around seven tonight. And if I know the thinking of my dear friend, here it will become crowded soon.' Tantche was sincerely pensive. Fifty meters away, Iossif was jumping around the Volkswagen and gesturing at them to come.

'I need to ask you a big favor, Mrs. Spassova. Will you trust me with the young gentleman for a quick tour around Brashlyan? I kind of promised him a ride...' Tanas was still holding her hand and Mitzi looked at him as seeing a phantom. May be it was the unbelievable physical likeness between grandfather and grandson, but it jolted memories about her first meeting with Tanas Sr. when he had asked a favor also not for him. She had used Iossif's credit to help the grandfather fulfill a grandchild's wish. The Fate was a woman, she loved a good joke. Tanas' other grandson had come to ask her permission to fulfill Iossif's wish. In an utterly complicated way her husband had been allowed to reap what he had sown. She wiped the fresh tears that sprang and nodded in agreement. Valkuda changed places with Tanas and stayed with her while Iossif was enthusiastically waving at them from the slowly cruising little red car. After few circles Tanas stopped in front of the church stairs. The boy sprang out of the Volkswagen and hugged Mitzi, then a slight frown creased his brow 'Why are the four of you crying?'

'Because you beat us at the run, sonny, just like that! It is our turn now!' Stavros chuckled. 'You remember what I told you about the best man?'

'You can skip kissing the matron if she is not beautiful and nobody will notice!' Iossif smiled and patted Mitzi's hand. 'Can we go and have something to eat, marriages make me hungry!'

Mitzi hugged Valkuda. 'I will see you both in Sofia hopefully at the end of September. Call me. There is a lot to talk about.' She quickly turned to Stavros 'You were absolutely right, her head and heart are at the right place!'

The old man smiled and looked at Iossif who was trying to be patient.

'Take care of him; he will be a great man one day!' he bended and got to the back seat of the beetle. Valkuda sat next to Tanas and the red car disappeared in a small cloud of dust. Not long after the Green Fairy followed.

An hour and a half later another cloud of dust announced a new visitor. The big black Jeep arrived at top speed and Dimitar was out of it as soon as the car stopped. Konstantin was waiting for him in the yard.

'Where are those two?' Dimitar yelled.

'Quiet, you will wake up lossif! They left just before midday.'

'Did they say where they were going?' the voice was lower but still carried away.

'No, they told Tantche that they will go to stop and have a lunch along the road. This could be anywhere.'

'And Tantche?'

'She left with Vantche soon after like they have planned.'

Dimitar dropped heavily on a chair under the vine. He had been in Varna and had called Rada as soon as he had received her message, then had got the fastest car available and driven to Brashlyan hoping against hope that his brother had been pulling his leg about marrying Valkuda. If Konstantin's grim face was any hint, it had not been a joke.

'Did they, you know...'

'They did. Their best man called in some huge favor to make Father Ivan marry them. Tantche went with them and lossif insisted to bear the crowns so Mitzi went with him, but that was all.'

'Gosh, it is not happening to me!' Dimitar buried his head in his hands, then jumped and said, 'I am going to Vassiliko and I will at least talk to them! Wish me luck!'

Konstantin did not even try to stop him although he really wanted to wish him common sense. His friend would need loads of it, he thought.

Gantcho the guarding rooster did not like the black Jeep from first sight and fiercely attacked the intruder. Stavros came out muttering that his quiet place had become as populated as the Central Square. He shoed Gantcho and waited for Dimitar to get out.

'Good afternoon! I am Tanas' brother. I don't know if you remember me, we have met once.'

'I remember. You have been feeding your brother at the hospital and came to pick him up. But you are too late now. He is not here and neither is she. Would you like to come in, I feel tired and want to sit down.'

Dimitar warily followed the old man in the decrepit but clean kitchen. They sat at the shabby chairs and Stavros looked at him thoughtfully.

'You were late when you did not claim her as yours. She came here yesterday untouched like a sand lily. But it was yesterday. Today she is your brother's wife before God and the people. That will not change no matter what you pour out as it is essentially your doing. Yesterday I had to keep watch around your brother as I did not know what he would do to himself but he did not run to Brashlyan to talk to you. Then she came and he made it right for her.

For the bread that you have fed me, I will tell you something. You don't need a wife now if you managed to let this one go. Not everyone is lucky to even meet one like her. You had her on your palm and still let her go. But then not every man needs a woman to be constantly next to him. Some of us get our thrills from other things. Think about it before making your life and the life of a good woman both miserable. When I look at you and your brother, I see your grandfather divided into halves. But the two halves did not come equal. You got different things from him. Tanas got the looks and the drive to be a partner and to be introspective. You got the stubborn streak and the solitude. No, don't get me wrong, you both share his qualities, but one of you got it more, one got it less. You together would make a great team if you manage to grind the reef that should not be there between you. Valkuda may help you if you listen to her. But she is not your woman, she is his. Whenever you are ready to accept it, come back and we will talk. Or you will talk. It is too early now. '

Dimitar was looking at the rusty tin at the table. He felt as empty as it was. His brother's marriage had ripped him open like the jagged lid. Had he really been that blind to not see that his jealousy had been ridiculous and ultimately had cost him the trust and love of the woman he thought would be his forever? The face of Stoyan Debarski swam into his memory. The old master had caught him hammering zealously a piece of metal that did not want to bend as he intended. He had stopped him and told him to go get him a glass of water. When Dimitar had come back Stoyan had told him that being jealous of the bell's clapper did not mean one can replace it. Every bell had its unique sound and only if the clapper and the bell had been tuned together then the song was a harmony. Then he had shown Dimitar how to bend the detail with series of

small, melodious strikes that had nothing to do with the ridiculous noise his apprentice had produced. In few minutes the piece had been perfect and the sun had reflected from the beautifully hammered surface.

'Tanas said you make bells...'

'I do, but it is more and more difficult with the years. Bells, like lovers, need strong arms and good ears and mine are giving away. I hope your brother will take over one day and he better be quick...'

'Tanas? Making bells?'

'Why are you so surprised? He has a perfect ear for that and is strong enough, that is for sure. He needs some more training but it will not take forever.'

'But he studied business, I mean, he never showed one artistic bone in his body!'

'May be so, but also it may be that all of you have been looking at the wrong bones and saw what you wanted to see. How often did you spend time with him?'

Dimitar thought hard if he had ever spent time with Tanas at all. Not in the last few years, for sure, as his visits had been to their grandfather and he had met Tanas at a formal dinner or two the most each summer. He rolled back, the army time precluded lots of contacts, both when Tanas had been serving or he had been. Roll back, two different school companies with six years difference did not have many reasons to mix. Both Tanas and he had been up to their eyebrows in their respective after-school activities to the point that they rarely dined together. Their nannies were not friendly to each other and did their best not to cross paths. The old man was right, he knew nothing of his brother except the gossips that were flooding the yellow press and what his grandfather had told him. Tanas was a stranger. Dimitar had no idea what his brother liked or disliked himself, well, chocolate cakes notwithstanding, nor what he read, or what music he listened to in private, what was his favorite color and why. They have rarely talked and it had been either in a presence of someone or about someone or both. The sculptor knew more about Stoyan's sons with whom he had spent years training and working. He looked at the old man with new respect.

The bell master was waiting for that look. He had been around for quite a while and knew that not only bells needed tuning. Some bells needed more shaving, some less, and so did people. The young sculptor had inherited too much of his grandfather's distrust and it would pick on his ability to interact. He needed to come to his senses but Stavros doubted he would live long enough to see it done. The old man aimed at

less - few days of happiness for Valkuda and Tanas undisturbed. They were like a molten metal poured into a form - little shakes would make them stronger, but if not cooled properly their perfect new form could crack. They needed to be left alone for a while before their song could be revealed. It had been a close call enough when Tanas had refused to cross paths with his brother. No, not with his brother. It was her he had not wanted to stretch into choosing between what would have been a comfortable prison and what could turn into a wandering of a lifetime. Luckily it was over.

'I will be going then... If you need anything, please let me know. And when they come back, will you please tell them to call me somehow...'

'I will. Wait for me, otherwise Gantcho may decide to take care of you himself and it will send you at least to the dry cleaner,' Stavros slowly stood up and saw off his guest. When the Jeep disappeared along the dirt road he turned to the rooster, 'Gantcho, you better get used to him, my boy, I think he would be coming again soon...'

The rooster flapped its strong wings and looked at his master with one beady eye but did not say anything.

The red Beetle slid in the driveway and Tanas unfolded from behind the steering wheel. He opened the passenger's door, picked up his barefoot wife and carried her up the front stairs. He fished his home keys without letting her on the ground and continued up to his place.

'I am not sure if the bed is presentable, I left somewhat in a hurry...' he murmured.

'Not to worry, you have laces there, you are covered!' his wife giggled.

'We need to test them, right now!' Tanas dropped her on the pristine bed and she did not have the heart to tell him she already had done it.

Dimitar called Tsarev upon arrival.

'Weren't you supposed to be on a honeymoon?' Andon was still somewhat irked that he had not got an invitation for the wedding. 'Don't tell me Valkuda plans to postpone it!'

'No, she went ahead, only changed the groom,' bit back Dimitar.

'How about if you explain it in few more words?'

Dimitar poured it out all. The lawyer was listening with dismay. Years in court had taught him to keep his emotions under tight reign, and he managed to grunt at proper places while covering the microphone when the fits of laughter were choking him. After the young sculptor stopped ranting, Andon decided to plunge ahead:

'Well, she does not need to resign just because she did not marry you!'

'What, I have to work with her on a daily basis like that?'

'Let us be very very honest, you have not been working with her on a daily basis up to now, so it will not be anything new. Dimitar, with all my due respect to your grandfather, but he overestimated your business acumen. Valkuda had been rowing like a slave on a galley and you have been splashing around. You are fantastic at what you do, but you have neither the training, nor the grip of what needs to be done with the business. And she is a family now anyway.

If I were you, I would dump officially everything on her, hire her an assistant and try not to meddle. Of course you have all the control and stuff, and it is up to you what to do, but she is the best prepared to cope with that volume. That is it, if Tanas is not going to be against, you have to ask them both if you decide to go that way. If she opts to accept, you will be free to work at last and spend a minimum time supervising.'

That was it, he had said it. It had been on the tip of his tongue since he had been in Varna, but did not want to spoil the honeymoon. As it was over for Dimitar at least, it could be dragged into the open. He expected a Tanassov's trademark blow-up and was already pulling the receiver from his ear when Dimitar sighed and said, 'Maybe I do have to think about it... I don't promise that it will be easy though...'

'No, it won't be, but will be honest at least. You have a God-given talent and you are wasting it, she is overloaded so it is a waste also, how about if you do something for both of you?'

'I need to talk to her first and I don't even know where they are,' Dimitar sounded tired.

'Maybe a message on her answering machine will be a start? Well, you may need to write down what you want to say, but it is fine, it cannot be seen over the phone! Chin up, young man! Go and write! Good luck!'