

Hiding Places

The town was buzzing. Although the fireworks had finished almost an hour before, the crowds were reluctant to empty the streets, some going to the restaurants and taverns that stayed open for the occasion, some heading for a friend's house for few drinks, some just strolling and soaking up the excitement. Nobody paid attention to a nurse slipping into an apartment building. People were used to doctors and nurses making house calls at all hours of the day and night. The nurse did not enter any of the apartments though, exited the building's back door and crossed the silent dark backyard. Few more backyards and the white cap disappeared into the servants' door of a silent big house. It softly locked behind her.

The house was silent, which meant that her father was not back yet. Dora passed through the dining room and was heading towards the stairs, when a soft voice stopped her.

'We are here!'

Nada was sitting on the sofa facing the stairs and her feet were popped on a small footstool. Vesselin was sleeping with his head on her lap, and Dora unconsciously smiled as she had seen them like that more times that she dared to count. It was his favorite place when he was still a baby. He had not relinquished it over the years, but the sofa that was once dwarfing his little body was coming short by a foot now, and his socks-clad feet were propped on the arm-rest. Even in his sleep he had not let go of his mom though, his hands locked around her. Nada bended to kiss his head and he jumped, scattering the pillows, eyes full of dreams trying to focus.

'Dora's back!' said Nada and tried to stand up. Dora rushed and stood on her knees before her, letting the older woman hug her fiercely, running her hands all over her to be sure that her little girl was all right. Only then Nada started crying, silent tears rolling down her face that held the traces of the beauty that she had been, almost imperceptible sobs escaping, but her hands were firmly clutched on Dora's shoulders. Vesselin hugged them both, a rare show of emotions that young man usually kept tight in reign.

It seemed like an eternity had passed, Nada and her children did not move in the darkness, the only light in the room a slight reflection of the front entrance lantern which had started to swing in the growing wind. Sofia was up for one of the early autumn storms. Those seemed to come from nowhere and disappear as suddenly after just of few hours of lashing rain that poured like it would never cease under the hauling of the wind. The faint click of the lock woke the three people from their reverie and Dora stood up to meet her father. His still immaculate appearance was in stark contrast with the distorted expression of his face. Sensing a movement, he schooled his features, a moment later crumpling again under the wave of relief that his daughter was safe. He hugged her and held on to her, much like her mother, until she whispered, "I told you I will be home before you, Daddy!" as if he was still returning from the university and she coming from a play with her friends in the neighboring yard.

'Mom is in the sitting room,' she said and took his hand. Dora led him to the sofa, seated him next to Nada and asked her brother to put on some light. Vesselin switched on the side light and sat in the armchair next to his mother. Dora retrieved her satchel from the first stair and opened it on the coffee table. Then she drew a breath and looked straight into her father's face.

'Todor and I did not talk politics, Dad, so there is no message for any party. At least not one that can be shown without putting everyone involved in mortal danger. Here it is.'

The young woman took out Todor's bloodied shirt and handed it to her mother. Nada stiffened at the touch of the fabric, but held it tight to her heart, absolutely silent.

'Dad, you said I have your blessing whatever I decide. I have decided to fulfill the promise to join my life with him and I hope you bless us anyway!'

Dora took out Todor's Bible, opened it to the front page and handed it to her father. Lambri recognized the characteristic scroll of his friend and ally. He turned it for Nada to be able to read it as well. She nodded.

'You have done the right thing, my dear, and you have our blessing, child, whatever you have done!' he said heavily. 'I had always dreamt that your union will be a day of joy, but if it was God's will to be like that...' his voice trailed.

'It was proper, Daddy, it was as it should have been, mom baked us a bread, you gave us the wine, Todor gave me a ring and even a present,' she smiled tremulously, fumbling with the buttons of the uniform that

she wore. She pulled Todor's cross and the ring and held to them for a second, before she handed it to his father. 'You will put it somewhere safe for me, Daddy, please!'

'He gave you his signet ring?' whispered Nada incredulously. 'He gave it to you? But...'

'Mom, he did not have much of a choice. I know it is too big but I cannot wear it anyway, someone is bound to look for it and if he recognizes it...'

Yes, someone was bound to be looking for it, Nada was absolutely certain, most probably he already was, or would be very soon, so better it be hidden as soon as possible. She almost said that aloud, but it was Lambri who spoke first, 'I have no right to pry, but...'

The question in his voice was not accusing and Dora grasped her father's hands.

'Should the circumstances be different, no, Dad, but as I may need all of your help, yes. Our union is... valid...' Dora turned scarlet, 'and I don't know what will happen but I pray that it will, so I have something to love from him, Daddy. I know I will be considered a disgrace, but...'

'You will never be considered a disgrace, Dora!' Lambri interrupted her vehemently, 'and don't even think of it! I am proud of your decision, child, and we will live and see what happens, but I want you to be sure that we will always be there for you! Hey, I am old enough to be a grandpa!'

He stood, taking Dora up with him. He led her to the stairs, but stopped before going up. To the surprise of his children he started twisting the newel finial. In few seconds the seemingly solid wood opened to reveal a cavity. Lambri put in the ring and the cross still attached to it. Nada looked over and rearranged it so that the ring was at the bottom and the cross on top. 'Now it is safe!' she said and her husband screwed back the top piece tightly. The line that separated the two parts was so intricately hidden in the carvings of the rose that the finial represented, that neither Dora, nor Vesselin, who had spent their lives gliding that same railing when nobody had been watching, had ever suspected it.

The grandfather clock started chiming midnight.

'It has been a long day, and we all need to be strong for what tomorrow will bring. So go to bed and try to catch some sleep, everyone. Good night and Dora, I am proud of you, I want you to know it!'

Lambri took Nada's hand and they went up the stairs. Dora bended to retrieve her satchel and suddenly felt so very tired. Vesselin sensed it and rose to catch her when she swayed. He steadied her and for the first time she had returned said something.

'You are the most amazing sis that one can dream about! What you did is incredible, Dora, you are incredible! One may just dream to find someone as good as you for a wife, you know! I hope... you know... about that baby, but you need to rest now, you are exhausted! I will help you get to your room!' He picked up the worn satchel without letting her out of his arms and carried her to her room.

'You will manage by yourself?' he asked timidly while putting her on her bed.

'I will, thank you for everything!' Dora sighed wearily and started unbuttoning her uniform.

One of the burly men came to pick up Dr Poshtov. He did not talk, just pointed at the door and then let him in the execution room. The gallows were a wooden platform few steps up and Todor had already placed his books on the trap door, right under the rope. He turned and looked at Poshtov, his surprise evident at the look of his handcuffed hands. He acknowledged the doctor with a slight nod, but did not try to speak to him.

'Did we tell you that you are not worth of a bullet? We keep our words!' hissed Tashev. 'There are no allies around, no foreigners to save you! Go up, there is no one to witness your pathetic last minutes! Save your breath! It is your last anyway!' the laughter was not shared by anyone in the room. Todor marked himself with the sign of the cross and stepped on his books. Then he put the rope's end around his neck, looked at Tashev and said, 'I swore on my brother's grave that I will fight even if my head falls. I have kept my promise also!'

There was such an aura of calmness around him, such utter detachment, it propelled into silence even Tashev's bodyguards. Stamenov was pale as a parchment, unable to control the tremor in his hands. Poshtov was standing still, like a pupil at his desk, and trying not to blink, as if he could will the time to stop. Todor was looking straight ahead, as if he was looking at someone coming from a distance, but when Poshtov looked in the same direction, at that place there was only the whitewashed prison wall. The bodyguards were somber and the only agitated one was Tashev, who looked at his watch and then at the door again. There was a distant thunder and in the silence immediately after they heard a loud argument coming from the prison gates. Tashev's eyes turned to slits, 'Oh, it looks like someone is coming for you! They will be late!'. He pulled the lever.

The trap door opened with a bang and into the darkness under the law books fell first. Then the tall man went after them, not much, as he was really tall, and from where Poshtov stood, it looked like he almost was

touching the floor of the gallows, but his body swing like a pendulum of a nightmarish clock. It seemed ages passed before his body finally stopped swinging, long after the last mercy the Fate had dealt to him - he had died instantly. Nobody else moved.

The commotion at the entrance of the death row wing was growing louder. Tanas had finally managed to gain entrance and was virtually dragging the Chief Guard with him to open the doors. Tanas could feel the taste of his success, as the guard had assured him that Tashev and his men were the only ones to enter the wing before him and the director and a doctor were present. It would be finished in no time, he thought, for the first time in years allowing himself to be impatient. He kicked the door of the execution chamber and the blood froze in his veins.

'Get him down! NOW!' Tanas thundered running up the gallows, pushing Tashev aside and restoring the trap door into its original position. He tried to hold Todor upright by pulling one of his hands over his own shoulder and for a second the live and the dead men were like a couple about to dance, then the lifeless arm slid down and Todor's head dropped back, the broken spinal column not able to support it anymore. Tanas was a strong man, but hardly a match for Todor's dead weight and for a moment it seemed that the dead man was dragging him in another tango step. The cords and veins of Tanas' neck swelled in his effort to keep the body upright and he rasped, 'Help me!'

Tane, Tashev's bodyguard, run up and hoisted Todor's body on his shoulder, like a sheaf of wheat, and lifted, like he had done during harvest, this time the crop different, but the movement had the practiced ease that came from generations of folks gathering the fruits of their labor. Tanas feverishly pulled the rope's end from around Todor's lifeless head. Tane prudently laid his burden on the gallows' floor and Tanas ripped the dead man's shirt apart to listen for his heartbeat.

'Do something! Get a doctor!' he yelled at the petrified Tashev. Tanas scanned the room and recognized Poshtov. 'Here, fast! Get the handcuffs off him, idiots!'

Next moment the Chief Guard was fumbling with the key and Poshtov was rushing up the gallows to kneel down next to Todor's body. He knew that there was nothing that could be done; only God resurrected the

dead, and Todor was undeniably dead. The doctor checked for pulse, lifted the eyelids, but it was just the routine that was working for him. Dr. Poshtov looked at Tanas.

'I am sorry!

'I said, do something! I need him alive!' Tanas harked. 'You are a doctor!'

'He is dead, not ill!'

Tanas was not listening. He turned towards Tane and croaked, 'Get the doctor's bag here!'

'Errr, he did not have his bag...'

'So get him another one! There is an infirmary in this prison! Go fetch one! Stamenov, go get him the key!'

The director left the room without a word. His face was purple.

'There is no need, nothing can be done any more to...' tried to interject Poshtov, but was cut in mid-sentence by the look of Tanas' face. Where a second ago there was incredulity and a shred of impatience now laid a mask of black fury, so intense that the doctor flinched and backed. Tanas was holding Todor's left hand and looking at his fingers. His face became as pale as the dead man's one and he barked, 'His ring is missing! Where is his ring?'

'I don't know,' Poshtov was backing in earnest now, the intensity of Tanas' anger spreading like waves in the small room, 'I was not allowed to examine him before they hanged him...'

'Find me his ring!' Tanas yelled. 'Go search his cell! Everything there, everything! No, stay here! I will search myself! Tashev, did Todor give you his ring?'

'No, he did not give it to me.'

'Did he give it to anyone here?'

'No, we just got him from the cell and were fast, we thought that someone was coming to snatch him out, just as you said!'

'You imbecile! I told you that I want him alive and not to start without me! You were responsible to keep him alive until I come, cretin, I needed him alive to give me his ring! Now the ring is gone and Todor is gone, you botched everything! I want a list of everyone who had been in contact with Todor since I met him last week! Everyone! Who brought his water, who brought his food, who washed his dishes, who had been in the wing to sweep the floor, everyone, you listen! Where is Stamenov, damn it! He should have been back ages ago! Someone fetch him, he had probably fallen asleep in his study, the old dolt!'

Tashev motioned to his other bodyguard and the man ran the short distance to the director's study. He stopped at the door and looked at the man lying on the papers on the vast desk. He did look asleep. The bodyguard stepped closer to the circle of light flowing from the desk lamp. From there it was clear that the puddle formed under the old man's face was surely not red ink. Stamenov was not breathing either. So the bodyguard's shriek did not disturb his last sleep.

Tanas, Tashev and the guards burst in, their pistols drawn and ready. One look at the scene relieved their fears of an attack, so they started putting back their guns in the holsters, Tanas approaching the desk. He looked at the old man's body and heaved at the Chief Guard, 'Go fetch the doctor!'

He wrenched the heavy set of keys from the gnarled fingers that were still clutched around the ring and shook the blood from the shiny metal pieces. Without the anchor of the keys, Stamenov's hand slid from the desk, leaving a thick line of blood over the top drawer, smearing the handle. The drawer looked like a Christmas present, tied with a crimson ribbon with a knot. There would be time to open it and look in, Tanas thought, there were more pressing things to do. The plan had gone to hell twice in a night already, but God loved triples, so there was more to come. He should remain vigilant. Where was the blasted doctor?

Poshtov was reading the simple words of the requiem as he remembered from countless vigils at his patients' beds. Usually it was a priest who was chanting, but the doctor was not sure that such kindness would be extended to Todor. He doubted that under the circumstances the executioners would hand the body to the family. If they had kept their word to save their bullets, they would probably follow on with "nobody will know your grave" also. Poshtov was not too religious a person, but he squirmed at the thought. No grave meant no closure, no way to grieve openly for the people who loved him, forcing the agony of not knowing to prolong indefinitely. The doctor thought that he had somehow to transfer the message to someone, anyone trustworthy to deliver the blow to Todor's sister, as she was the last one remaining of their once formidable big family. If he himself lived long enough to meet anyone at all, that was it. The long shadow of the Chief Guard fell upon him.

'Mr. Tanassov needs you there. The director died.' The young man held his hand to help Poshtov stand up.

For a second time since midnight Poshtov was kneeling before a dead man. There was no doubt, Stamenov had suffered a massive heart attack and had probably not even felt the pain. Despite the blood smeared over his face and the front of his suit, he looked at peace with himself, the death mercifully smoothing the hard-etched wrinkles on his face. Laid on the dark floor of the office he had occupied for so long, the director looked taller than he had given the impression he was, with his shoulders slumped as if he had been carrying all the burden of the troubled piece of world he had managed in the last thirty years. Stamenov probably had spent much more time in the prison than at his modest home, Poshtov realized, the director had been its inmate longer than most, probably longer than anyone. Yes, he had been free to leave, but he never had used his freedom for himself. Stamenov had seen countless men leave for good, some to return almost immediately, some to blend in the society, some even to become prominent like Tashev. But he had also seen the others, who had left through the gates of death, some hanged, some led to be shot at the army barracks shooting ranges, some succumbing from torture or sheer exhaustion in the last few years of turmoil. A month before the much loved prison priest father Vassil had died and now Stamenov had followed. Poshtov trembled. The world that he knew was slipping away one man at a time, no, not one man, but more and more, in a ever increasing rhythm of a gypsy song that would swirl the heating passions and then leave the main heroes dead, eternally beautiful, but dead nonetheless.

'I am sorry!' he said to nobody in particular.

Tanas needed to decide fast. The death of the old prison director was not helping - it had to be confirmed before the news of Todor's execution hit the town. The speculations were inevitable, but if he stuck to the truth about Stamenov as close as possible, then the credibility of the Todor's death would be better. There was the question about the death protocol, it should have been signed by Stamenov and a doctor, damn it!

'Tashev, who will sign the protocol about Todor now?'

'Nobody. Stamenov signed it before we started; now the doctor will sign and we are all done!' Tashev smirked, then caught Tanas' stare and hastily headed to the door. 'I will fetch it!'

'Finally something to be done right! Doctor, please sign the protocol. Then you will accompany Mr. Stamenov's body to the closest hospital and do all the required paper work that is necessary to confirm that he had died of natural causes. I don't want even a shade of doubt to be cast over such a highly esteemed

servant of law. Tashev, one of your bodyguards will escort the body and the doctor and will return the doctor after all is finished. Doctor, I believe you know what will happen to your family if you do not return and let me assure you, there is no corner in this country where I will not find you. The Chief Guard will assume Mr. Stamenov's duties for tonight and in the morning I will inform the Minister that a replacement is unfortunately necessary. Am I clear?'

Tashev had brought the protocol and put it on Stamenov's desk. Poshtov stood up, took the simple pen that laid on Stamenov's inkwell and dipped it in the black ink. Under the bright light the liquid moved like a broken mirror and for an instant the doctor thought that he had made a mistake and opened the red well. No, it was just an illusion, the red reflections were from the blood on the papers, starting to dry by now, but still bright red and Poshtov checked his hands for blood stains, most out of habit from the operation room rather than a conscious gesture. He signed his name and title and was surprised that his hand was steady. He handed the protocol to Tanas who inspected it carefully, folded it and put it in his breast pocket. Then Tanas turned to Tashev's bodyguards and asked, 'Who of you is driving?'

'I do!' offered first Sotir, the guy who had found the dead Stamenov.

'So now we will load the body and you will take them to the hospital, the doctor will direct you, then you will bring him back when finished and will handle him to the Chief Guard. May I presume that you will remain here until you are needed?' he asked the Chief Guard, who swallowed convulsively and confirmed. 'I believe between the two of you, you don't need help to carry Mr. Stamenov to his car?'

Both men did not hesitate. Sotir picked up the dead director's feet, Poshtov locked his hands under his arms and they wobbled towards the door. The Chief Guard went to accompany them and open the doors. He thought that it was a night when a lot of doors had been opened and a lot of doors had been closed. Then he thought that it might be too late for Dr. Poshtov, but there were few other people who the boss had thought worth letting out and if he could do it for him tonight that would be his final gratitude to the man who had marked his life. Stamenov, who had given him, the then almost a child, a job after his first arrest for a stolen loaf of bread, who had vouched to the judge who had been Stamenov's old friend for the boy and had thus spared him a conviction, then he had drilled him through the ranks never letting himself to soak a drop of the immense respect that the young man held for him, who politely refused even the ultimate request to be his best man, saying that it should be family affair and he would be glad to be a guest at the church, but

not at the reception. The Chief Guard had named his first child after the old man, and that time had insisted that Stamenov become a godfather. The elder man had accepted somewhat unwillingly, saying that he was too old for such an honor, but had baptized his namesake nevertheless. The little mite was two almost and the Chief Guard suddenly remembered Stamenov's thickly veiled advises that had become more and more frequent recently that his godson would benefit from some fresh Swiss air and some cow milk and cheese that was scarce in Sofia since the end of the war. Was it that Stamenov knew more than he told him? The Chief Guard was on duty on rotation, but Stamenov was at the prison practically every night, days off and days on, sure he had seen more. The Chief Guard thought that he should arrange for the funeral, under the pretense that he was on duty when it happened and then talk to his wife about that Swiss air in earnest. Their meager savings should bring them that far at least. Now the guard was sure, the doors were closing and the few who recognized the signs better be quick. He opened the door of Stamenov's car and helped the two men lay the body on the back seat. Poshtov sat next to the increasingly nervous Tashev's bodyguard and the gates of the prison opened again that night.

Dr. Poshtov directed Sotir to Boris' hospital. The two doctors had not been exactly friends, but their mutual respect and Boris' proverbial frankness were something he could count on. More, the hospital was one of the closest and Tanassov had instructed that the paperwork should be done fast, so Boris' one was relatively safe choice. Poshtov's only prayer was that Boris would be there himself, or might be his assistant Milev. He would not trust anyone else with what he had to say and that was his only chance, he was sure that he would not live much longer.

The nurse who answered the bell took one look at the car and its grim cargo and ran inside, motioning them to wait. She returned with Boris in his white gown. His eye grew round at the sight of the dead man on the back seat, then he turned and came back wheeling a gurney. He was aware that Poshtov had been arrested and held in the central prison, so his presence was something that required an explication. He did not know how to ask, nor any of the two men were volunteering a word. Boris finally shook his head and said, 'Dr. Poshtov, if I judge correctly there is not much that we can do for Mr. Stamenov at this point, but I will appreciate your help to put his body at the morgue. I believe you are here for the papers?'

'Yes, you are right. Mr. Tanassov insisted that it is properly and promptly done, please!'

'I will need your help to put him on the gurney. Unfortunately my night staff on duty is currently operating so I cannot pull anyone. Sir?' Boris looked at Sotir who was looking as if he would have been anywhere else but there.

'Sure, sure!' the guard was more trouble than help, so both doctors did most of the pulling and lifting. 'I have to take the doctor back to the prison!' Sotir mumbled.

'Not so fast, young man, you cannot dump a dead body at my hospital door and depart the next minute!' Boris liked the man less and less. His eyes flicked to Poshtov and he glimpsed his colleague's shiver. Boris squared his shoulders, 'There are forms to be filled, autopsy to be performed to determine the cause of death at least, I have to call the authorities to report the death that did not occur in my presence as I need two witnesses to sign the protocols. As I understand you are not to let the doctor out of sight, so please proceed to the morgue with us.'

Boris did not even look if Sotir was following his instructions, but went to open the door and motioned to Poshtov to push the gurney. The guard gingerly stepped after them. He was not afraid of blood, but he had seen so much of it recently. He was getting afraid of the dead people, as they were returning in his dreams and he was waking more and more often screaming and frightening his parents. His mother was brewing for him some calming draughts that got more and more bitter and worked less and less, he had thought of getting another job but was afraid to tell his boss, as Tashev was unpredictable to say the least. He hated it!

Good doctors are good observers, and Boris was one of the best. He knew that he should get rid of the guard and thought fast. The morgue was small and presently empty, but there were enough preparations to scare the hell out of an average person even in broad daylight not to mention after midnight. A malicious smirk curved his lips. The previous day he had procured a severed human head preserved in formaldehyde from Medical Academy for his assistant to practice for especially difficult operation on facial nerves. The anonymous donor was probably a poor man whose relatives had preferred to sell his body to the institute instead of paying for a funeral or a homeless man that no one had come to identify. Anyway, his remains might help many people in more ways than one.

The gurney stopped at the door of the mortuary and Boris looked at Poshtov. 'I will put a bucket to hold the door while we wheel him in, hold on, please!' then he turned to Sotir, 'It is heavy, will you please help me to lift it?'

Poshtov was a very good doctor also. The hint of cold in Boris' voice did not escape his ears; neither did the fact that Boris had just lifted the much heavier Stamenov's body without grumbling. What was his colleague up to? He gripped the gurney's handles.

Boris opened the door and took hold of the left side of the handle of a white enameled bucket. He asked the guard to take its other side and they lifted it together. City grandmas used such buckets to put their sour cabbage at their balconies, thought Poshtov awkwardly; it was not standard hospital equipment. He blinked and missed the wobbling of Boris' knee which sent the bucket's lid clattering on the mosaic floor. The guard's eyes reflectively followed the lid, then he looked at the bucket's content and screamed, letting off the handle as if it had suddenly burned his hand. Boris held the bucket without spilling a drop of it, put it on the floor and steadied the young man whose eyes were rolling up into his head. He put him on the floor and unexpectedly grinned at Poshtov.

'I hope you have seen that before at the anatomy classes and I will not need to hold you! After you, please!'

The two doctors wheeled the gurney with Stamenov's body and Boris closed the door. He opened a medical supplies cabinet and got a bottle of smelling salts ready for fainting relatives. He did not move to the door, but looked at Poshtov instead. 'I believe we have about a minute before the guard may start getting some feelings. What can I do for you?'

'For me - nothing! I am a dead man. I witnessed the execution of Mr. Todorov tonight and I doubt they will let me live after that. The death of Mr. Stamenov mixed their plans evidently; otherwise I would not be out of there. But if you will be so kind to transfer a message to my wife to get out of the country, I will be eternally grateful. I will understand if you refuse however...'

'I won't refuse. Now I will go and wake the guard. I doubt he will joint us here, especially when I show him that there is no other exit, I will put him on a chair outside the door and put the bucket for a security measure next to it on the inside. The door is soundproof and we may talk then. I can perform the autopsy myself while you write a letter to your wife. Unfortunately there is no phone here...'

'I cannot call anyway. Mina is up at the summer house.'

'Then it is settled. Just put a white gown and take whatever instrument you find to look at work!' 'Boris went out dragging a chair and put the smelling salts at the guard's nose. The man stirred, took one look at the doctor and moaned, 'So it was not a nightmare!'

'Sure it is, but I am real. I will understand that you may not wish to be present at the autopsy. This room has no windows and this is the only entrance, you may safely sit outside, I brought you a chair. That suits you?'

'Is it going to be fast?'

'I will do my best, you know, but it will depend on the patient. However I will benefit from the help of Dr. Poshtov to finish faster. May I rest assured that you do not require assistance? In case you need anything, you may ring the bell, as the door is insulated for the cold to be kept at all times, you know we have several body parts that need cooling to preserve them...'

The guard was turning green again and Boris wisely decided not to push his luck too far. He helped the guard to sit on the rigid hospital chair, took the bucket and placed it inside the cold room right next to the entrance. The guard followed his movements like a kid watching the lion at the circus ring. Boris locked the door.

Poshtov had put the white garment and was preparing the instruments. Boris looked at his capable, accurate hands, at the precision of their movements, at the practiced ease of Poshtov's posture and was overwhelmed by a wave of hatred at the people who were about to destroy that. He could do nothing to prevent it, just like he was not able to save Todor, like he was not able to save countless others. How long he would have to witness the cream of the cream to be wiped away as dust on the grand piano! Why he had fought more nights and days that he dared to count for every single chance to save life and now he had to bite his lip and see the perfectly healthy, perfectly decent men and women accepting the slaughter in order to save someone else they loved, or save an idea of dignity, or save the image of a party or of a country that had been imminently unfair to them. Boris thought of Stamenov and his blood ran cold at the thought of Dora. Had she escaped? Did they get her also? Why he had agreed to her idea of the prison's visit at the first place, Boris agonized, she should not have gone, what if Stamenov had died before he was able to let

her out and she was somewhere there at the mercy of people who did not know the meaning of the word? How much Poshtov knew? How much was he willing to tell?

'Dr. Poshtov, I am sorry I don't have much more than the notepad sheets and pencil here, but if you write your wife a letter, I will do my best to transfer it to her. Please sit down and write fast. We don't know how much time we have as more of the prison people may show at the door at any minute. I will start the autopsy without you.'

'I appreciate it, I really do! Will you also tell Mr. Todorov's sister that her brother died like a true Bulgarian, a great man! I did not have a chance to exchange a word with him, but his last words were that he had promised on his brother's grave to fight even if he would lose his life and he had kept his promise. Tashev killed him fifteen minutes after midnight, then Tanassov came and tried to revive him and was yelling something about Mr. Todorov's ring that was missing. He sent Mr. Stamenov for the key of the infirmary, although it was impossible to do anything, Mr. Todorov had died instantly. Then the guard that is outside went after Mr. Stamenov and found him dead on his desk. There was pool of blood, it should have been instant... Tanassov ordered to bring him to the closest hospital to properly do the papers and I chose yours with the selfish hope that I will be able to ask you a favor.'

'Tanassov most probably already regrets that he had sent you here. Let us not waste time. Sit down and write, I will do the rest.'

Both men set in their tasks. Poshtov was sitting at the small table at the corner and his pencil was gliding silently over the small pages of the recipe's notepad. Boris was cutting, clamping and slicing, deep in his thoughts. The massive heart attack was indisputable, his actions more a formal acknowledgement and an effort to gain credibility for the presence of Poshtov and steal more time for him. He thought of the lazy hours of the days bygone, when they were thinking that eternity was the limit and the time was abundant to enjoy, that the good days were ahead and after the war the things would settle back into normal. How naïve of them... His heart lurched painfully at the site of Stamenov's heart; it looked like that was not the first time the heart of the old man had been damaged. It had gone unnoticed, the man never complained, he had been too preoccupied with the problems of the others. Tonight his tired motor had finally got too much. Boris felt a stab of guilt that he had not seen the symptoms when Stamenov had come to pick up Dora, he had been too concerned about Todor and her to pay attention. Might be he could have done something, and

then might be not, as Stamenov had looked the same soft-spoken self, the same polite old man that nobody paid attention to and who hardly left his routine road prison-home-prison with occasional visit to a hospital or the courthouse.

'I wish I told Mr. Stamenov to get his heart checked earlier!' ventured Poshtov, who had silently approached the table. He was holding a small stack of notepad sheets, folded in two. On the top one there was the name of his wife and the address of their summer house in a resort fashionable among the middle-class families as a residence during the hot summer months.

'I thought tonight that he was not breathing easily, but hoped that he was just tired and that I would have time to tell him to go to a good cardiologist and get some rest. And then it was too late. I could not do anything.'

'No, you could not have done anything, look!' Boris let Poshtov have a look at the old man's heart and the other doctor let a sigh.

'It was too late for him. It had been a question of days anyway. Now let us think about the future. Are you sure you do not want to try to escape? You can knock me unconscious, whack the guard and get out. Get Stamenov's car and get out of town! Hide somewhere until all this madness pass! Or get your wife and children and run!'

'I won't get far. Sofia is full of spies, and even if I get to Panagyurishte, they will catch me there, so probably they will shoot me, Mina and the children "at an attempt to resist". Tanassov told me clearly that they know where my family is. It is useless, but if I am still in prison maybe they will lose the rope's end for Mina and she will manage to get the children out of here for good. Please, Boris, do whatever needs to be done to get the message to her. Once away she will have access to some funds and will be able to repay...'

'She will have nothing to repay. Vassil, I will do my hardest to get you out of there also.'

Poshtov interrupted him, 'You are forever optimist! You have no idea what you are facing! If I were you, I would grab my daughter and run as far as I can reach and then some while there is still some opening!'

'I am not running! There are too many people who need me around here!'

'I thought that you will say something like that! I respect your commitment, but have no illusions, the people you are fighting are not human!'

'I know... Give me the papers and let stitch Mr. Stamenov. He managed to get you out of the prison even dead, we owe him that much!'

Boris carefully put the notepad sheets in his inner pocket and was putting the thread in the needle when the bell rang.

Boris went to open the door. Sotir was standing, his face a much better color.

'How long it will be, I need to get the doctor to the prison, I don't have the night to stand around!'

'We just need to stitch close all that we have opened and then we are done, say, another ten minutes. Are you taking the body with you also?'

Whatever color Sotir's face had regained, drained. 'No, I have been ordered to take just the doctor. Sure the prison will send someone to collect him properly.'

'In that case I will ask you and the doctor to sign the protocol. Were you present at the time of the death?'

'Errr.... No, but I think nobody was present, I found him in his study...'

'Well, I will need you to sign anyway.'

'I am not getting there!' Sotir jerked towards the morgue.

'No need to do that. I will bring the protocol to my office as soon as we finish. Few more minutes of patience!' Boris was wiping the blood from his hands with a handkerchief and Sotir was sick again. He dropped heavily at the chair and stared at the wall across. At the basement level where the morgue was situated the walls were whitewashed. The glare of the single light that swung as the massive morgue door closed was making them look bluish. The noises of the town did not reach the premises; the doors leading there were heavy and firmly shut. Sotir felt like he was back at the execution chamber and the light was Todor's body swinging back and forth, each swing bringing it closer. Sotir clutched his gun for reassurance and firmly held to the chair. Few minutes, the doctor said, few minutes.

Poshtov had not stopped stitching and was finishing the grim task as Boris approached. He put the last few stitches, turned, silently washed his hands and patted them dry. Then he looked at his colleague. 'I thought about something while you were talking to the bodyguard. Tonight Tanassov made such a fuss about Mr. Todorov's ring, it was disgusting. The man is not yet cold and they are already bickering about his jewelry

like highway robbers. I don't want to give them the satisfaction to do the same with me.' Poshtov pulled off his baptismal cross, then twisted off his wedding ring and hastily handed them to Boris as if afraid that he might change his mind. The younger man understood. It was the last link between Poshtov and his former life and now it was broken. Once the prison doors close after the older doctor, it would be a waiting game. Poshtov's once influential patients were either his fellow prisoners, or abroad, or too preoccupied with saving their own skins to care for his one. Unless a miracle happened, the doctor was doomed, and Boris was too tired to believe in miracles. He sighed wearily and packed the cross and the ring in a piece of gauze, then slid them in his pocket next to the letter.

'I will take care they to reach your wife. And I will provide her with the money to leave the country...'

'Thank you, and take care of yourself, the decent men are getting sparse and the country needs every one of you!'

'Try to stay alive, may be we will be able to turn the tables soon enough!'

'Boris, you are an intelligent man! Run, while there is still time for you, I was a fool not to see it and think that the hole in the hull will be patched! Grab what is left that matters to you and run! You are renowned specialist, every clinic around Europe will be glad to have you! This is God's gift, don't waste it!'

Poshtov sensed he was pleading a lost cause, could read it in the dark brown eyes, smoldering at him across the table where Stamenov's body lay. These were dark fires that charred a soul if the person was not careful, and they made him think of Tanas, the intensity of his gaze, so similar in its passion and yet so different in its content. Poshtov felt that for a second time that night he had looked at the face of Baal, the storm consuming the men of his country with ferocity that was unprecedented in its already bloody history. The thunderstorm god was not aware that his rival was already after him as well, it was a question of time before both were destroyed, but the time of gods and the time of mortals were measured differently. Poshtov was tired, bone tired of everything that had come his way in only few years. He would be grateful for one last grace - to know that the woman he cherished and their children would be safe. He himself was ready. Vassil Poshtov went to open the door.