

THE GIFT OF DIAMONDS ©



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PROLOGUE

I escaped Romania in the middle of the night by bike on February 2, 1965. It was the moment when the country was locked into a communist prison. I was seventeen years old then. Now, twenty-four years later, in the frost of 1989, with the beginning of freedom, I'm returning. As I walk through customs at Bucharest's Osteopenia airport with my American passport held tightly in my hand, I feel a strange sensation- memory is pulling me backward to a lost time.

I see my seventeen-year-old self in front of me, leading me into the labyrinth of youth. She takes my hand and warns me of pitfalls while I enter a world I may have forgotten. She's cute, smiling, spunky, full of life. One would say she had been very loved by her parents.

I follow her, admiring her short black hair cropped straight around her oval face, highlighting her high cheekbones and hazel eyes, with a small pointy chin and full upward lips. She's of medium height, dainty like porcelain on the outside, but more resilient than she realizes inside. She's dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and tight black leggings, wearing high black leather boots and covered with an Elizabethan coat that closes with a belt wrapped twice around her thin frame.

She leads me to a customs desk where I present my papers to an officer without any communication other than his curious stare. I realize his silence, inherited from communism, still lingers. I look around me. There's only one electric bulb for the entire room and its 40-watts flicker and die. The wind blows through the broken window pane, letting in some light but also a winter chill. The airport is empty except for several policemen carrying machine guns. I watch them, smooth-skinned boys dressed up as soldiers.

At the baggage claim, waiting for my suitcase, I notice bullet holes in the cement walls and dried blood on the floor. Broken glass and used bullets fill every corner of the room. Someone tried to clean up proof of last month's revolution, but didn't finish. There's a heavy silence permeating the air. Danger and risk still exist.

I reason to myself that I had to make this journey. And I look around, trying to find Mica, my seventeen-year-old self, my guide. I want to confess to her why I'm here, why I have come alone, despite the suffering that might befall me, as it did in the past. But I can't find her.

I see my suitcase coming down the conveyor belt. As I pick it up, I feel it heavy. I try to grip the handle tightly

and suddenly I feel a piercing pain coming from my right little finger. I close my eyes, try not to cry. I remember... I was ten years old, walking home alone from school. A policeman was trailing me. He handcuffed me, forced me onto his motorcycle, and took me to the chief of the secret police.

“In my office, I have the power to do whatever I want.”

He unlocked my handcuffs, put my small hand into his, and removed from his pocket a small pair of pliers. He flashed the tool in front of my face and placed the metal tip under a special light. I saw it turn fiery red.

“Only you can save your father. Work for us and your father will be safe.”

“Don’t ask me that. Please. I can’t!”

“Such a sweet little pinky you have.” He took the red-hot pliers, tightened it on my fingernail and pulled hard. I was on fire, burning. I fell down in excruciating pain.

“Get up!” He pulled me up by my sweater. His red-hot pliers played with my thumbnail, burning the tender skin around it...

I’m twenty-four years older and I’m returning home. I am now a goodwill ambassador to UNICEF for refugee children. This is one of the reasons for my visit. I have established an adoption agency in Transylvania for orphans, and I want to check that medicines from New York are being distributed correctly to the orphanages, and that each child has a crib or bed and food that we have sent.

I’m also returning because when I escaped, I had left something for my father in his underground bunker the night he was arrested. I need to find out if what I had hidden, is still there. I’m afraid, yet excited, to learn the truth.

That’s why I’m seeking my teenaged Mica, to guide me to a lost past. And as I search for her in these hollow halls of the airport, something unexpected is happening before my eyes. It’s the reappearance of images from my youth. I try to hold on to the scenes as clues to help me understand how the past shaped my future.

I look back to see, to feel, to relive the moments....

“Every year on my birthday, my father and I talked about monsters and vampires. Tata was a wonderful storyteller. I cuddled in his arms and listened to tales of what happened in the woods of Transylvania where we lived.

In Romania, when we spoke of vampires, we meant Count Dracula, Vlad the Impaler, on whom so many

legends were based. In Spera, the small town where I grew up, he was remembered as a prince, a leader who protected his people from the Turks when they invaded Romania in the 15th century. Still, we had to accept that his heroic deeds were cloaked in blood-thirsty evil. He believed that blood preserved his youth; thousands of innocent people died at the flick of his hand so he could fortify himself.

Mama did not approve of Tata's stories, but she never stopped him. As she cooked, she'd frown while Tata laughed with joy, telling me his tales.

As I became a teenager, what he shared became more complex. My father explained how the behavior of monsters and the character of man could intersect. Tata was an engineer, and he constructed a stage for me where his stories became lessons for survival.

By the time I was seventeen, Tata's stories had taken a different route. The characters were no longer based on legend or fairytale. I became the protagonist of the story. My father was preparing me for what I would need to know: I was the daughter of a revolutionary.

Father was the leader of the Transylvanian anti-Communists, which proved very dangerous for him as well as for Mama and me. My mother feared that Tata's secret mission would make me grow up too fast; she realized his work would affect my entire life. She tried to counteract the dangers by preparing me for the future: I would get to America. She taught me English and read Shakespeare to me.

When Tata was not home at night because of his clandestine activities, Mama took me into the kitchen, ran the faucet strong so no one else would hear her words, and took out our short-wave radio to listen to Radio Free Europe. She'd translate the broadcaster's English words into whispers and reveal the political truth to me.

As politics turned ruthless, Tata's stories scared me. I wanted him to stop, but I stayed and listened. Now, years later, as I look back at my childhood, I understand his motive- his vampire stories were warnings. Politics had turned inhuman during that time in Eastern Europe, and his lessons became guiding principles to help me overcome hardships. My father's monsters taught me that there is evil in man. Given the proper situation, man is capable of becoming cruel and sadistic. Tata didn't want me to become a victim; yet, there was nothing he could do. I would be tested and I'd have to fight to survive.

But Tata's passion for life overruled the savagery that surrounded us. He was optimistic, determined to do what was right. And he had a secret treasure, which he believed could open the door to dreams. I inherited his reassures not realizing then that they were tainted.

PART ONE: SPERA (TRANSYLVANIA), ROMANIA

February 1, 1965

CHAPTER ONE

"No, no, Juliet. Not like that!" the white-haired director yelled before lowering the curtain. Mica stopped reciting her lines. She hated displeasing Mr. Marinescu. He had taught her so much and introduced her to the love of her life: the stage. "Your words must come from your heart," he explained. "Act as if you're a woman, not a child. Think of everything you're losing!"

Mica squeezed her eyes tightly. It was difficult to be unhappy when she was playing Juliet and Romeo was as handsome as Nicky. But she did as direct and turned her thoughts to the Secret Police, who had come to their house in the middle of the night. "We'll be back," the chief had warned her father. "Every night. Until we find out what you're up to."

"That's it, Mica! I feel your fear," the director shouted. Fear, yes, for my parents, she thought. That's why I must repress my true feelings for Nicky.

"You must get this right. *Romeo and Juliet* is the first Shakespearean play the people of Spera will see."

Her eyes wandered past the chandelier with only one 40-watt light bulb, to the tattered red velvet curtains and crumbling cement walls. Modern times seemed to have forgotten her town at the Romanian-Hungarian border.

"Start from the beginning of the balcony scene one more time," he shouted. "Remember people, tomorrow is opening night."

Mica tried to forget that the freezing room was no longer an elegant theater; that the broken chairs hadn't held an audience in years. She concentrated on being Juliet. Marinescu raised the curtain, and Mica moved closer to the edge of the stage. Taking a deep breath, she recited her lines:

*"My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.
And all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay
And follow thee throughout the world."*

Marinescu stood up and applauded. Waving his beret, he yelled, "Brava, Mica!"

She took a deep bow and smiled, imagining how everyone in Spera would applaud her tomorrow night. Emile Marinescu's production of Shakespeare was such a big event that even people from Bucharest were traveling to their small town to see it. And she was the leading actress.

Holding Nicky's hand, she practiced a curtsy while he bowed and kissed her cheek. She felt her body turn warm. This was the only good thing that could keep her from worrying about her parents.

Then Nicky led her into the wings, where he put his arms around her waist, pulled her near, and brushed her lips with his. It was magical- better than she imagined, but Mica was pulled instantly back to Earth by the sound of the tram station's clock striking 5:30. "Oh, no," she whispered to Nicky. "It's almost curfew." She was so nervous she didn't have enough time to get her father his dinner and then be home before seven. The Secret Police seem to be patrolling more actively than usual.

Nicky gave Mica one last kiss. He moved her closer and held her tighter, kissing her neck. She closed her eyes to enjoy him near, and then suddenly, upon hearing another clock chime, she moved slightly away and covered her thin frame with Juliet's Shakespearean coat. She smoothed down her short, cropped black hair and whispered, "Forgive me. I must go!"

She raced through the theater's dark corridors and climbed the broken stairs. Still tingly from Nicky's kiss, she was struck by the freezing cold outside. Her hazel eyes teared and her face stung as if tiny knives were piercing her skin. Running in the dark, she shuddered at the thought of being alone in the empty tram station.

She moved toward the shadow of the barbed-wire fence where she had locked her bike. Someone tapped her shoulder. She stopped breathing and turned around slowly. Relieved, she saw Nicky, her Romeo, grinning down at her. When Mr. Marinescu had chosen her out of twenty-five girls who had auditioned, she had thought only of her role. But then when she saw Nicky Strancusi, a nineteen-year-old engineering student, she couldn't believe her luck. He was so handsome. Six feet tall, thin but muscular with broad shoulders. Black wavy hair that he wore long, covering his ears. He looked like a Roman god she had seen in history books, with blue eyes and devilish smile. After four weeks of rehearsing together, she felt she could give herself to Nicky. Enjoy him without restraint, for the very first time.

He leaned toward her and rested his elbow on her bicycle seat. "*Delay this marriage for a month, a week. Love only me,*" he told her, while reciting his lines.

Mica laughed, pleased wanting to believe his words were true.

Nicky took her hand into his. "Let's practice our lines together. Alone. We have an hour and half until curfew."

She was tempted to say yes. She wanted so much to be with him, feel him close, but she sighed. "I can't." Reluctantly, she climbed on her bicycle.

He unclasped her fingers and softly kissed the open palm. "Don't forget tomorrow's cast party after opening night. We're having champagne and caviar. One of the actresses got them from her boyfriend." Then Nicky's face turned sad. "Only someone from the Secret Police can find champagne in this country when there's not even milk for a baby."

Mica nodded sympathetically. She hated the *Securitate*, especially after they had raided her home in the middle of the night and threatened her father. "You're on our blacklist now!"

She turned to Nicky and whispered, "I can't talk... *'I must be gone and love, or stay and die.'*" As she got on her bike, she tried to sound more cheerful, "*Till tomorrow, Romeo.*"

Mica biked away from the station, turning for a moment to wave good-bye to Nicky who appeared as a tall black figure in the fading daylight. Ever since Mica had joined the student Shakespearean troupe in town four years ago, her life had changed for the better. Every day she'd wake up excited, knowing she'd rehearse or perform on stage after school. And to help her get to the theater and home more quickly, her father had given her a bicycle. It hadn't been easy for her father to buy one. Bikes were impossible to find, even on the black market. No one in school, except for her history teacher, had one. Mica was lucky her father had connections.

She knew that he would have been a rich man if they had been able to get out of Romania. But he kept saying the timing wasn't right to get past the border into Hungary without being seen by the Romanian Secret Police. He believed the moment would come when the Communists changed leaders, when there'd be total disarray. He said it could happen any day.

Mica set out for her house to collect her father's dinner from her mother. She didn't ask any questions, but she knew that he and his followers were planning something big, and it was a secret, something unspoken about in her house. Tata was afraid that the walls could have ears or neighbors would spy. Mica had no choice but to

continue her studies, practice her lines as Juliet, and see her friends on the weekend. It was not easy for Mica to pretend her life was like everyone else's. A double life was a difficult role. For her mother and father also, who went to work as always since the police were watching them. But in the past three evenings, Mica had to get involved with real action. It was her duty to bike to the underground bunker and bring her father dinner that her mother had prepared while he and his followers were strategizing every last detail to overthrow the Communist leader.

"You're late," her mother said as Mica pedaled up to the house. She had obviously been watching for her from the window. "How's Nicky?"

"He's not like anyone else." For one second, Mica closed her eyes and smiled. Then she took her father's dinner from her mother and packed it into the basket mounted on the rear of her bike. "I can't wait until tomorrow night! You and Tata will be so proud of me. I'll save you front row seats."

"Good idea. I'm looking forward, my darling, to see you on stage. Something good for once." Mica noticed her mother's round cheeks, usually flushed and full, appeared pale.

"Tell Tata to eat this dinner only when he's alone," she whispered. "It's in the cup. Then bike home as fast as you can. You know I worry about you!"

Mica pedaled away as the last rays of daylight faded. She heard the howl of a rabid dog, and she reached behind her and took out a wooden club her father had hidden in the rear basket. "Just in case," he had told her. Mica hated Spera in the dark. There were no lights anywhere, no cars, no people, no life. Only the sounds of wild dogs howling and searching for scraps. They were known to nip at cyclists' legs, even maul children. People would leave their house with a club or stick in hand because the stray dogs carried rabies.

Mica veered off the main road and followed a narrow path into the woods. She had come this way so many times that she could have found her father with her eyes closed, but with the darkness closing in around her, she proceeded carefully and ducked to avoid the overhanging branches that blocked her path. Her father and his engineering students had designed and built an underground secret labyrinth during World War II so that they could fight the Fascists. After the war, they had abandoned it until a few days ago as they prepared their anti-Communist rebellion. The bunker was carved inside the earth like a tunnel, built with a sleeping area lined with dozens of bunkbeds, a large bathroom, a kitchen, an armory, and a private office for her father.

She pushed her bike slowly through brush and broken limbs using her high leather boots and a stick to clear the way. She came to a stop and hid behind a tree to assess if anyone other than her father's men were near. Then

she laid her bike among the fallen trees and covered it with dead branches. She quickly went through the trap door next to the abandoned glass factory that marked the site of the bunker. As she made her way to her father's office, she couldn't help but notice an unusual mass of machine guns leaning against the stone walls of the armory. She worried that this meant their preparations were imminent.

When she knocked on his door and saw his full head of bushy red hair shine in the light, she felt reassured. He greeted her with a red pencil in one hand and a map in the other hand. "Mica, sit with me while I eat."

"What is it, Tata?" she asked. "What are you planning? Can I be part of this?"

"No, my love," he said, kissing her forehead. "You're busy enough as Juliet. I don't want anything to happen to you."

She put his dinner on the table, but before she could ask him more, the cement floor began to vibrate, and they both turned toward the metallic noise of wheels rolling against the bunker's stone floor.

"Stay here," her father said to her as he went out to investigate.

Mica waited until she heard him talking with someone before she sneaked a look. The sound of wheels came from a slab of wood fastened to four wheels. On top of the plank was a man, his body cut off at the waist. His torso sat on top of a hollowed-out hole in the wooden plank. His hands were inside two metal cans, and he used them to balance his half-body so he could stay upright.

The "Snake Man." That's what her father and his men called him. His head was huge, out of proportion to his narrow chest. His long, spidery arms extended to the ground as he swung his arms and used the cans to push himself forward. Shadows fell across his face, his features deformed. He had braided most of his long black hair but for a pompadour above his forehead that he had wrapped around a small stick and where a black and yellow snake now curled. The reptile was so still that Mica couldn't tell if it was dead or alive until she saw its slithery tongue snap out of its mouth.

They finished their conversation, and Mica's father patted the man on the back. The Snake Man made his way down the corridor as Mica stared, mesmerized at the way he maneuvered his half-body.

"Poor man," her father said, sitting back down at his desk and taking the tin cup that Mica had brought. "He wasn't always like that. I knew him when he was a tall, handsome student. One day the police arrested him because he was in the street after curfew. They wanted him to denounce his friends, but he refused. So, they hung him from a tree upside down for several days. When they were done with him, they threw him in the mud. He had no circulation

left in his legs, and he got gangrene. His legs had to be amputated.”

“How awful.” Mica rubbed her thighs and a shiver passed through her. She felt so sorry for him.

“That’s why he’s full of hate against the Communists. He’ll pretend to work for them and be our decoy.” Her father stood up from his desk and walked over to the map he had been studying when she arrived.

“Mama said to eat this when no one is near you. There’s a message inside.”

He took the tin cup and with his fingernail, he pried open the false bottom that revealed a note folded in four which he read and then burnt it with a lit candle on his desk.

“A good way to communicate with me,” and he winked at Mica. The smell of beef stew and corn pudding filled the room, and her father started to eat. Then he stopped.

“*Draga mea*, my dear” he said, standing up and putting his arm around her shoulder. She felt his red mustache rub her cheek. It pricked her but she didn’t move, wanting to hold on to the moment. Her father didn’t move either. When she looked up at him, she noticed how tired he was; his broad six-foot frame appeared less powerful than it had ever been.

“Mica, you must perform tomorrow evening as Juliet…” He paused and then slowly went to his desk. He unlocked the bottom drawer and took out a map of Transylvania. It was marked with red dots.

“I keep telling myself you’re a young woman now. Seventeen.”

“Yes.” But why was that making him so sad?

“I don’t know what will happen, but if someday I don’t come home, if your mother doesn’t come home, you must get yourself to Hungary.” He smoothed the map out on the desk between them and drew a line from Spera to the border. “This is the route I took years ago, during the war, when I worked in the Resistance. There’s a hidden trail through the forest, and when you cross the border, you have to get to the train station. You will have to run 5 kilometers to get to the first station in Hungary, but you can do it.”

She wanted to ask him why he was telling her this now, but she was afraid to know. He looked so sad and she worried for him.

“I traveled on foot. It took me six hours in the middle of the night to get to the border, but it can be done faster by bike.”

He made dots along the route he had drawn and explained what each one meant: a fork in the trail, a grove of pine trees, the fence at the border, the electric wires. “I will go over this several times until you have memorized

each detail.”

She nodded her head.

He opened a drawer with another key and pulled out a pile of black and white photos of the Romanian-Hungarian border area. “You’re going to have to use trees and buildings as markers while making angles with your eyes.”

He showed her photos of a dense forest, pointed to several buildings, a 12-foot fence, a cable box. Then from another drawer he opened a secret compartment and took out a ruler and compass.

“Where the last pine tree and barn meet, create a sixty-degree angle with your eyes. Then look down to the ground.” Using the ruler, he drew a diagram. “Create an isosceles triangle with two equal sides at that spot. The two lines will converge at a point where you will see in the distance the chimney of Dracula’s castle.” He paused and explained, “This is the way explorers navigate uncharted land.”

She studied the photos in his hands and watched him measure the angles with his ruler and compass.

“This is the section of the fence from which you will dig a rectangle the same size as your body,” he explained, circling the point with his red pencil. “The earth is muddy and soft there. Dig two feet deep and don’t forget to do the same thing on the other side of the fence, so you can pass safely through.”

He repeated the directions again and again, and then cautioned her not to give in to the impulse to run toward freedom after crossing over. She needed to stay focused to keep from attracting any attention that might alert the guards on either side of the border.

After an hour of learning from her father and then being quizzed by him on the plan’s details, Mica’s sweater was soaking wet even though the room was unheated. She noticed her father’s face was red and a vein under his left eye twitched. She watched him rip the map and photos into tiny pieces and burn them with the lit candle on his desk.

He took her hand, put her palm against his lips. For several seconds, he stroked her fingers. “*Draga*,” he had whispered. “If you can’t find me or your mother, if you know in your heart that we’ve been taken, then you must take the diamonds from the basement. Remember how I’ve shown you to dig them up. They will buy your freedom. They will protect you for the future.”

“Tata, no. Don’t say that.”

“Whatever happens, you must be strong. Don’t ever give up hope. No matter how hard. Think with your mind and act with all your heart. When in doubt, go with your instincts.”

She hugged him with all her strength. He wiped his eyes and looked away, sighing. Sensing his silence as a signal to leave, she kissed him good-bye on each cheek and moved away. He held on to her for a moment more. "I love you more than life," he whispered. "Never forget that."

She wanted to answer, "I love you too," but she said nothing, being so confused by his map lesson and what he was telling her she'd have to do. She couldn't absorb yet the reality that her life was about to change and that she'd be responsible to achieve the change. Reviewing in her mind his directions, she was in shock; although, she had known for years that her father's anti-Communist work could have grave consequences for her. She didn't realize though, it would come now.

Saying good-bye, she saw his shoulders slump forward and his head bent in thought. She felt it was best to leave him to his work. She took the hidden staircase, then tiptoed through a secret corridor and climbed out to the night from a different section of the tunnel. Glancing from one side to the other, she searched for a moving shadow or noise. No one, just rats trying to move faster than the bitter wind.

On her way home, she took a detour through Gypsy town. The people of Spera believed Gypsies stole children and took them far away. Whenever Gypsies marched through town, parents took their children's hands. The Pied Piper was a Gypsy who led children away forever with his magic flute. Yet, when Mica watched Gypsies dance with their colorful costumes and their arms thrown upward to the sky, she was surprised to see they looked like everyone else, except they were so happy.

She passed their broken-down shacks and noticed that rats were scurrying into ripped garbage bags. Cracked flower pots with garlic pushing out of the earth were all over the muddy ground. There was no food to buy in stores, so the Gypsies planted garlic that they ate whole. Some people said they also ate dandelions from the mountains and even pink poppies. Mica wondered if that's why they acted so strangely.

A stray dog ran after her, barking and growling while reaching for her boot. Mica gripped her wooden club tighter. She didn't want him to hurt her or she to hurt him. All she wanted was to get home quickly so she could sit by the fire with her mother, safe and protected.

Spera was in sight; Mica could see the church steeple. Free from the dogs, she slowed down while passing the infirmary, a dilapidated two-room shack. Her arm ached as she recalled going there to get shots for tetanus when she was small. Now the facility was closed. The doctor had disappeared one night with his wife. People said he had bought visas for France, visas that cost a fortune. Her mother had said, "Lucky man. He traded his Brancusi for

freedom.”

Almost home, she couldn't help feeling as though someone was watching her. Something moved against the wall of an abandoned building. She glanced from one side to the other, looked over her shoulder and moved faster. A noise from a motorcycle; it grew louder. Someone was breathing. There was the slow tapping of footsteps down the cobblestone street.

Mica's heart pounded as she accelerated, thinking of the big green armchair at home by the fireplace.

“What's a school kid like you doing out so late?”

The man's voice made her jump. She froze, stopped her bike, her heart beating faster. She noticed that his nose was red and swollen with streaked blood vessels. She had once seen a man with a nose like that and her father had told her, “Too much drinking.”

The policeman ordered her to get off the bike and to drop her club. She noticed he couldn't walk straight. He searched her, starting with her back, touching her shoulders, and moving from top to bottom, down her legs.

“Turn around.”

As he touched Mica's chest, he jumped backwards. “My God. You're a girl!”

She pulled away before he could come near her again. She was furious at him for touching her, and furious at herself for not fighting back. But she had to keep herself in check.

“Show me your I.D.”

She handed over her card, wishing she could throw it at him, and got on her bicycle to defy him. The policeman grabbed her handlebars, pulled her toward him. She smelled his clothes, bitter with nicotine and sweat. “You shouldn't be out this late.”

She considered just riding away, but it would be risky. He could shoot her.

“Where do you live?”

Mica pointed toward her parents' house beyond the road and up the hill.

He came closer. She remembered her father's advice after the Police had raided their house. “If anyone should ever start questioning you, cooperate. Don't fight. And don't be angry with yourself for giving in. Pretend you're acting.”

She blinked her eyes and put on the flirtatious voice she had seen in a French movie that had been shown months ago in their little theater. “Yes, you're right. I'm going straight home. Need to do my homework.”

He glared at her, then pushed her hard, and laughed. “Go! *Vede-ti de treaba,*” the policeman yelled, puffed up with power. “Get out of here before I put a bullet through you.”

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

February 2, 1965

She woke up to a layer of snow covering their house. Pulling the blanket to her chin, she lingered lazily in bed and practiced her first lines, “*O Romeo, Romeo. Wherefore art thou Romeo?*”

She picked up the clock on her night table: seven a.m. The glass of water next to it had turned to ice. She jumped out of bed, put on slippers, and went to see if her father was home. She looked for his hat at the front door. Nothing. His boots and coat weren't there either. She ran into the kitchen where her mother was preparing breakfast.

“Where's Tata?” Mica asked.

“He's gone out early,” her mother answered. “He said to tell you he will see you tonight at the play. He can't wait.”

Mica watched her mother. Her lip was trembling, and she didn't look up when Mica went to stand next to her. “Is he okay? Is everything ok?”

“I'm sure everything is fine,” she said as much to herself as to Mica. She finally looked up and Mica could see tears in her mother's eyes. “He didn't come home last night,” she whispered. “Sometimes that happens when it gets too late.”

“I'll go and check on him in his bunker before I go to the theater.”

“No!” her mother shouted; Mica jumped away, surprised. “You have the play. We'll be there tonight, and your father can tell us what happened afterwards.”

“Mama, tell me the truth. Do you know what Tata is planning?”

Her mother leaned in close to Mica and shook her head. “I don't,” but Mica got the distinct sense she was lying. Her mother set a plate of eggs and goat cheese cakes on the table before her. “You have to have a good breakfast today to keep up your strength!”

Mica choked down a few bites while her mother bustled around the kitchen. She tried several times to ask her more, but her mother wouldn't answer and only interrupted her to remind her to bring an old jacket that one of the boys was using for his costume. “Mica, I can't wait to see you tonight. I know how hard you've worked for this.”

For a moment, Mica let herself believe that all was well even though her instincts told her it wasn't. "Maybe someone from Bucharest will see me, and I can find a place in the theater program after I graduate next year."

"One thing at a time," her mother said, trying to smile. Then she turned serious again. "When you get to the theater, ask Mr. Marinescu if he wants to come to our house for your father's birthday."

"But we just celebrated last week," Mica said.

Her mother crossed the room and turned on the faucet and continued talking over the roar of the running water. "Ask him if he wants to go swimming with your father. He knows which sharks to avoid. Above all, you must do whatever he says. No matter how hard."

"I always listen to him, Mama. It's through him that I discovered my passion for the theater. I've learned so much from him."

"Yes, I know, my darling. But this is different. "

Mica sensed something was very wrong. "Can I trust him? Really trust him?" she asked.

"Yes. But make sure you speak to him in English. Only in English."

Mica couldn't get her mother to explain what might have happened to her father, so after a few more unanswered questions, Mica decided to go to the theater to distract herself. When she arrived at the stage door, she was immediately drawn into the whirlwind of preparations for the evening. Mica and the rest of the cast spent the day finishing the set and getting the theater ready for the play that evening. She should have been exhausted by the time they went backstage and started putting on their costumes, but she had never been so excited. Her friends came backstage with a bouquet of blue mountain flowers. Marina said they picked them for her at their favorite trail. Christina added, "To bring you good luck." And Anca laughed. "You've been so busy rehearsing that you couldn't hike with us Saturday, so we brought something from the valley to you." They chattered and laughed until the troupe seamstress told Mica she needed to adjust her costume.

Mica, Anca, Marina, and Christina had grown up together in Spera. What they liked to do the most together was to hike. Saturdays, in all weather, was their time together, to feel free wandering in the woods of Transylvania and the Carpathian Mountains. They'd hike through pine forests and valleys carpeted with purple heather and laugh. Their favorite game was to hold hands like a human chain. "One for all and all for one," they'd sing, walking in a line, "*We are the poets of our lives.*" And then they would bend down low, swing their arms to the sky and start

again, holding hands, walking in a line, feeling so free. *“We are the poets of our lives.”*

Sometimes after they hiked, they’d go to the Saturday market in town. There was never much to buy there, but once, when they were thirteen years old, they saw a Gypsy, all by herself, seated in a corner, hiding, selling something that Mica, Christina, Anca and Mariana had never seen before: a lipstick, not completely new, but more than half full, of a hot pink color. Next to it in the Gypsy’s rough hand was a little pointed glass of nail polish, also half full, the same color pink. Mica ran home and got some *lei* to buy the treasures. Every Saturday until it lasted, the girls would put nail polish on their toes. They wore the lipstick on special occasions.

Everyone in class called them the Four Musketeers because they were always together. They even sat at the same table every day in the school cafeteria. Anca was the poorest of the four. She’d only bring one slice of bread for lunch that she carefully packed in the same old gray scarf. Mica always brought two sandwiches, two pieces of fruit, and two slices of bread with rose petal jam. She always sat next to Anca and made sure her friend had one of each and wouldn’t go hungry.

On Friday evenings, the four friends would go to the Youth Center and listen to records. Often the boys joined them and they’d all dance to the 45 rpm records of the Beatles that Mica’s father had given her for her 15th, 16th, and 17th birthdays. Mica loved to dance. It was the only time she could stop thinking.

She never knew exactly where or how her father got “Yesterday” and “Michèle.” When she asked him, he smiled and answered, “My friends want you to have a Happy Birthday.”

Birthdays were special for everyone in her class. Whenever someone had a birthday, their favorite teacher, Doamna Rosa, would make a cake and bring it to school. It wasn’t easy to find real butter or eggs or milk or flour in Romania. Such delicacies were available only on the Black Market. But no one questioned the teacher. They were all too busy enjoying the treat.

What Mica enjoyed the most was going to a movie with Anca, Marina and Christina. Every two months, Mr. Marinescu got a reel of a 16- millimeter film that he showed in their little theater. Usually it was in Romanian, but sometimes it was in Hungarian or Russian. Once, he showed a film from France with Yves Montand. Mica couldn’t believe how beautiful Paris was. For months afterwards, she dreamed of strolling on the grand boulevards of Paris or chatting with her friends at a café. At night, she’d go to bed and imagine how sweet was a chocolate croissant. A movie was the only way she could glimpse the free world and dream to become part of it, one day.

Mica already knew what she wanted to do with her life. She wanted to continue performing no matter what.

Marinescu had been a wonderful teacher, but if she wanted to be a real actress, or even more importantly, a serious dancer, she would have to find a way to get to Bucharest and study at the Conservatory for Dance and Performance. On stage, she felt unbridled in a way that she never did as she went about her regular day. Someone was always watching, always informing, and she had to be careful what she said, who she spent time with, and where she went. But when she danced, before an audience or even alone for herself, she felt her true nature come out. She'd lose herself in the movement of her body and feel free as if she were floating in air. Mica realized that dance is only true if it comes from the need to give meaning to life. For that reason, she needed to study and work hard. She hadn't asked her parents yet, but her plan was to go to Bucharest in September to audition. The thought thrilled her- dance, theater and the big city.

Mica slipped into the long Elizabethan coat she was wearing to play Juliet, and the seamstress of the troupe knelt to pin it up so that it didn't drag on the ground. The coat had been used before, but Mica was shorter than the previous actresses.

There was a knock at the door of their makeshift dressing room, and Nicky stuck his head in. He smiled when he saw Mica. "The audience has started arriving," he said. "Twenty minutes until places."

Anca, Christina and Marina waved good-bye as Mica watched them leave. Christina, with her long, fiery red hair worn braided in a crown, led the group, as always. Marina, the tallest and strongest, was the one to help them navigate the backstage scenery. And Anca, the intellectual, reminded Mica as she kissed her good luck, "Your tragedy as Juliet will prepare you to be more courageous."

Mica hugged her friends and returned to putting on her high black leather boots and arranging her Elizabethan coat. Nicky crossed the room, stopped to take her hand, and ruffled her short dark hair. "It really suits you," he said. "You're so lovely. Let me adore you."

Mica beamed, and her nervousness evaporated. She felt so lucky- her friends truly cared for her, and Nicky thought she was *lovely*. He wanted to *adore her*. When she'd step on stage she'd be confident. She'd focus on Nicky, only him- her Romeo. He kissed her on the forehead and whispered, "I know you'll be great. You're my Juliet."

Romeo and Juliet walked behind the curtain to take their places. But before they stepped on stage, he took her hand and squeezed it tight. "Good luck." Seconds later, the threadbare curtain went up.

All Mica knew in the two hours of their performance, was the sound of Nicky's voice and the swelling of her heart. The audience was swept away, and with their enthusiasm, she casted herself passionately into her role as she never had before. She would make Marinescu proud. She would make the whole town of Spera proud. But most of all, she would make her parents proud. As the final lines of the play echoed through the hushed theater, Mica lay on the stage, feigning death even as her heart beat quickly through her chest. The curtain fell, and she heard the roar of applause from the crowd.

She and Nicky stood up and kissed, unembarrassed, before taking their places at the front of the stage. The curtain went up, and the crowd was on its feet. The company took a bow, and then they pushed Mica to the front of the stage where she curtsied. Everyone cheered for her. It was the happiest moment of her life.

She looked to where she had reserved two seats in the first row for her parents, but they weren't there, and her heart immediately sank. Where were they? She looked around the theater, in the back, on the sides. Why weren't they there? She knew her parents would not have missed it for anything. Unless, unless...

Mica curtsied again, and when the curtain fell, she rushed backstage to grab her purse from the dressing room. Nicky saw her heading to the side door. "Where are you going? We have the party."

"I forgot something at home," she said, not meeting his eye. She knew that if she said more, the truth would come spilling out, and she had to keep it in check.

She jumped on her bike and pedaled as fast as she could. When she got to her house, she realized it had been torn apart. Lamps were broken. Chairs overturned. Even the walls had been bashed and ripped apart.

She entered her parents' bedroom. Clothes were thrown all over the floor. In the kitchen, broken plates and silverware were scattered everywhere. Her home was shattered. Riddled with panic, she remembered her father's words from last night. He had known that something like this might happen, and he was trying to warn her, to prepare her. She went to her room and sat on the bed to think. "Take the diamonds with you," he had told her. Mica knew what she had to do.

She remembered for a moment the cast party and Nicky. He would be wondering where she was, but there was no time for that now. With the house empty and her parents gone, Mica had to get out of Spera at once. Though she didn't know where her parents were, she knew they would have never have missed her performance unless something serious had happened. She feared they had been arrested. At worst..., Mica couldn't think about that. No!

If she stayed, the Communists would certainly arrest her and use her to put pressure on her parents.

Six years ago, her father had shown her the colored diamonds for the first time. She felt then, that her father was ashamed of having them even though she didn't understand why.

"Uncle Simion gave them to me," he had told her. "I just wanted to help my brother, so he wouldn't be arrested when he escaped. No one should ever know."

"I won't tell," she said, rolling the colored stones over and over in her hands. She had never seen anything like them.

He rubbed his bushy red mustache. "I don't know if it was my good luck or bad luck to have these.... I believe the green and red ones came from Auschwitz."

"What's that?" she had asked.

He hesitated, sat down next to her, moved his chair closer. "Auschwitz was the largest of all the Nazi camps during World War II. Terrible things happened there. 9,000 killed a day. More than a million human beings were murdered."

She looked down sad. "You've told me."

"Not just the fault of Germans," he said. "People from many countries, Romania, too. Some believed what the Nazis were saying, and some became animals because of prejudice. But the worst creature of all was Dr. Mengele. These are diamonds that he took from prisoners. They all died horrible deaths." He bit his lip and closed his eyes. "I didn't go out and seek them," he told her.

Remembering his words from yesterday, "Take the diamonds from the basement," she took the secret stairs and found the hand rake and shovel that her father had hidden. Although she hadn't realized before, he had been preparing her for this situation since she was a teenager. At the opposite corner of the room, she stood against the wall and took three giant steps forward. When her toe landed on a specific spot, she went down on her knees to dig in the muddy floor. Several minutes later, she hit something— the steel box. She took a brick off the shelf, picked up a key, and opened the box. Inside was a leather pouch, and she untied the string. Twenty precious colored diamonds lit up the dark cellar. Mica rolled the diamonds in her hands as she had done so many times before. The green, red and blue ones were so brilliant they created a rainbow in the dust. She put them back in the pouch and slipped them into her pocket, where their weight gave her strength.

Back upstairs, she triple-locked the front door, closed the living room curtains, and went to the kitchen,

where she turned on the faucet and both radios and went to work. Mica went to her mother's sewing box, found a needle and thread, and removed her bra. From a kitchen drawer, she took out a razor, knife, a screwdriver and shoemaker's glue. She went to her father's closet, where she searched desperately for his black engineer's bag.

She returned to the kitchen and sat down at the table with her mother's sewing box. Remembering the many afternoons with the costume designer of their troupe, Mica began with her coat. She opened the hem and hid the green and red diamonds next to the seam, sewing circles around the jewels to fix them tightly. Next, she did the same with her bra, and once she had put it back on, she counted six tiny bumps from the six diamonds she had secured in place. Last came the soles of her boots. "Juliet's shoes will bring me good luck," she said to herself as she hollowed out the soles and heels of her boots with her father's tools. She executed all these steps as if she was acting a role. She knew what she had to do, and refused to allow emotion to take center stage.

Afterwards, she got dressed, put on her tight black Elizabethan leggings and black sweater, covered her thin frame with her long coat from the play, and sat on the floor to pray. Several minutes later, she went to her father's dresser and pulled the bottom drawer out all the way. Against the back of the drawer, he had fixed an envelope with 500 American dollars that Simion had given him along with the diamonds. Mica tore the envelope from its hiding place and tucked it into her pocket, all the time going over and over the secret route her father had shown her on the map. By his calculations, it was twenty kilometers to the border between Romania and Hungary. It would take her five to six minutes per kilometer depending how thick the brush was and how strong the wind. It was 10 o'clock; she hoped to be at the border by midnight. Then, she'd need time to run to the first train station in Hungary.

Mica was confident she knew the woods well. Not because of her father's photos, but from the dozens of Saturdays when she and her Musketeers had hiked. She found it odd, though, that their pleasure was now her danger. She slipped out the back door of her house and walked her bike into the woods. She looked up into the night sky, hoping the wind would clear the clouds. Escape would be more difficult in the snow. Hearing gunshots, she hopped on her bike and took a path deeper into the woods. She lowered her body and leaned into the handlebars, trying to make herself invisible, but there was no escaping; there was more gunfire and then shouts of "*Ceausescu! Traiasca Ceausescu! Long live Ceausescu!*"

As her path turned closer to the road through dead brush, she saw hundreds of men marching into town. With soot and grime smeared on their faces, they looked like a horde of subhuman monsters. Each man wore a helmet with a yellow light and carried a heavy bicycle chain, which he snapped every other step as they marched in lines of

five toward Spera.

A helicopter flew so low that she was able to see a large “C” on it. For a second, she thought that someone from inside it might fire on the miners, but then she realized the helicopter was guiding the miners to Central Square. “C for Ceausescu,” she thought. The miners are working for Ceausescu. He has staged an uprising to use the miners to wipe out anyone who opposes him. Mica stared at the mob of miners, blowing whistles, throwing stones, hitting people with chains. Blood splattered on the road where they marched.

She watched a man run into the street, trying to cross the road. Dozens of miners surrounded him, flicking their chains and taunting him. He darted into a building, but a second later, he ran out, a fire torch in his hand. He threw the torch into the middle of the miners and laughed as the flames filled the air. The miners retaliated by knocking him dead and shattering the building’s windows. Chaos exploded on the road. Gunfire. Sirens. She saw a woman run out of a bus carrying a baby. The infant was on fire! Mica tried to curl herself up and hide behind her bike. She had never experienced violence before, and now she found herself in the middle of it.

Frightened, she crouched low behind a row of bushes. A voice from a loudspeaker mounted on a streetlight warned the people to obey. “Go home! Don’t fight back!” The distorted voice urged people over and over to stay inside and to not resist the miners storming into town. Then Mica saw the Secret Police marching toward Central Square. They seized the few people left on the street and beat them with wooden clubs.

Mica stared, afraid to move from her hiding place. She knew the uprising had been intended to terrify the people and create hysteria. Then Ceausescu could appear onstage and create a semblance of order. It was a classic Communist strategy, her father had told her so, treating citizens like cattle, rounding them up, bringing them to the range, and then locking them in cages. The iron curtain padlocked tightly.

Even from her hiding spot behind the bushes, Mica could smell gasoline as the crowd became increasingly hysterical. Through the chaos, she could just make out the Snake Man on his wooden platform moving quickly through the mob. Dressed like one of Ceausescu’s men, he had infiltrated the group of miners without being stopped. Though she couldn’t tell for sure, it looked like he had a canister of gasoline in his hand. Then a flame shot forth from his other hand and the ground all around the miners caught on fire as he lit the fuel and watched the flames rise to the sky.

The miners looked around them to figure out who had started the fire, but the Snake Man had disappeared. Within seconds, he reappeared and shot one of the miners, before rolling his slab of wood out of the way. In the

confusion, who would suspect a cripple of having sabotaged the attack? But still, a van moved toward him. Soldiers dressed in riot gear and armed with machine guns rushed out and shoved him inside.

Her father had said it would happen like this. The Communists would come, setting fire, shedding blood, and shrouding Spera in red. That's when he had planned their escape, their little family, the three of them together in the middle of the night. It would have been so easy with all the Police in town and none at the border. Her parents would have protected her.

Not seeing her parents anywhere in the melee, she pedaled as fast as she could into the protection of the forest. She slowed down as she passed the dirt path to the abandoned glass factory and came to a full stop. She didn't have much time, but she had to check to see if her parents were hiding in the underground bunker. She bit her lip and prayed, Please Mama, Tata, be there. Then I won't have to escape alone. Or maybe, even at all.

Getting off her bike, she was careful not to entangle her long coat in the brambles. It kept opening even though she had wrapped her father's belt twice around her narrow frame. The coat was warm and black, so she had worn it to become one with the night.

She pushed her bike slowly through the brush and broken limbs, watching for anything that might pop the tire. She couldn't have a flat tire. Not tonight. Looking around, she studied every moving leaf, every shadow, to ensure she wasn't being followed. Then, she laid her bike among the fallen trees and covered it with branches. This section of the forest was desolate and eerie as if time had completely passed it by.

Walking slowly to avoid stepping in a ditch, she felt for the trap door and then kicked some dead leaves off it before descending the secret stairs. As she approached the office, she saw that her father's door was wide open. She stood still behind a column and listened. No one. She touched her heart as if to quiet its thumping, then stepped inside the room. Still no one.

Maybe her father and mother were hiding? She pressed a button she knew opened a secret door that led to a dark closet and beyond that to a safe room. She moved a rug from the floor and slid open a wooden panel. "Tata, it's me, Mica," she whispered, leaning down to peer into the bunker's lower floor. No one.

She went to the lamp on his desk and felt the bulb. Cold. She moved toward the stove where he made his beloved espresso. The coals were cold too. Her parents hadn't been there anytime during the past day, and Mica realized, terrified, that it was the first time in her life that she was truly on her own.

She sat down in her father's chair, feeling the indent, his body had made over time in the leather, moving her

body into his form. Staring at the maps on the walls, she remembered his sadness the previous night and felt the weight of his words when he had traced the route to the border and told her, “Memorize each detail.”

Her foot bumped against something metal, and she bent down to look under the desk. It was the tin cup that she had used to bring her father dinner the night before. She pried open the false bottom, hoping to find a message. Something. But there was nothing, not even when she turned the tin upside down and shook it.

She moved to return the tin cup to the desk, but stopped as the diamonds sewn into her bra pressed hard against her breasts. The diamonds! A message! She’d leave for her parents two diamonds so they would have something to escape with.

She slipped off her bra, undid the stitches with her teeth, took out two pink diamonds and dropped them into the cup’s hidden bottom. The jewels rattled against the metal. No good. What if a policeman picks up the cup and hears the sound? He’d get suspicious.

She studied her father’s room, eyed the stove where he made his espresso and took a handful of cold ashes from the coals. She mixed the black ashes in the cup with the two pink diamonds and buried them. She screwed the top on and shook the tin cup to check for noise. Satisfied, she placed the cup next to her father’s espresso machine. She reasoned if anyone snooped around, the tin cup looked like an ordinary cup for coffee. But her father or mother would understand. They would know there was a message inside! It was a risk, but she prayed it would work. She couldn’t leave her parents behind with nothing. She wanted to protect them, just as they had always protected her.

Mica made her way out of the bunker as quickly as she could. Even though all the papers were gone and there was no evidence that it was her father and his men who had been hiding out there, anyone could know about it now, and she had to get as far away as possible. Back in the woods, she pedaled faster than she ever had before, crying as she went and replaying the details of her escape plan from the night before. Not looking back, she felt a surge of hope. Spera was in flames and behind her.

* * *