

Red Hands

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*To Colin Sterling Sargent, son and friend,
with love*

Prologue

Portland, Maine, USA

Truth lies at the bottom of the well

TIRES SCREECHED on the usually quiet street. A car door slammed. I pushed myself away from my desk and wheeled to the library window. An intruder with a knitted cap pulled low blew past the gate and started up the brick walkway. I headed toward the stairwell and leaned over the banister, trying to gauge if I could duck this fresh hell. He rattled the door knob and with cupped hands peered into the sidelight. As he banged the glass, a Rolex flashed on his wrist. Late forties, roughly five-ten, dark curls brushing the collar of his fitted leather jacket like a 1960s movie star. His jawline was vaguely familiar, the extravagant watch a dead giveaway. The former race driver Catalin Tutunaru wasn't going to be put off.

“Colin. I know you're in there. Your car is in the driveway.”

I moved from the stairwell to the door. “How did you find out where I live?”

“I asked at your office.”

“They shouldn't have told you.”

“Are you going to let me in?”

“I’m deciding.”

“Aw, come on, man, don’t I bring you scoops?”

CATALIN AND I had met when I wrote a review of the Romanian sport-utility vehicle dealership he was launching outside of town. The four-wheel-drives were rugged, cool, and never failed to turn heads and elicit a “nice rig” from teenagers. I overcame my skepticism. Maine just might prove a good beachhead to sell these Cold War souvenirs. The self-indulgent market, always on the hunt for the next new thing in post-Revolutionary chic, would surely snap up these relics.

Catalin embraced his interview experience, perhaps because he’d been out of the limelight a few years and missed the celebrity status. He even forgave me a gaffe: I’d asked if his Auto Romania vehicles—originally designed for soldiers and now Warsaw Pact surplus—had “Soviet” styling.

“Soviet!?” Catalin jumped to his feet, his hand on his heart. “AROs are the product of a free Romania!”

It struck me that I didn’t know much about his homeland, beyond having seen *The Prince and the Showgirl* and the Marx Brothers in *Duck Soup*.

During the interview, Catalin took off his jacket and folded it neatly over the back of his desk chair. “One moment, please.” He pulled up his shirt. With a manicured index finger he pointed to a depression on his lower torso where a tiny devil had dug something out of his side. The crater was two inches deep, three inches wide, the excavation surgery ragged and rushed. The skin had healed to a pearly shade. “This too is a souvenir of my homeland.”

“In Maine, we’d call that a hunting accident,” I said. But it didn’t look like something a deer rifle would do.

“Good one,” Catalin said. “I’m going to use that.”

SO HERE was Catalin now, standing in my foyer, grinning. No question about how he’d earned his nickname, The Cat.

“Well, this is weird,” I said. “What’s up?”

“Do you know anything about the Ceausescus?” Catalin asked.

“The dictators? Nothing beyond what I’ve seen on CNN.”

“Perfect. There’s someone I’d like you to meet.” He crossed his arms and motioned with a quick jerk of his head toward his Porsche, which looked like a spaceship that had landed in my Victorian neighborhood. I could see a shadowy figure hunched down in the passenger seat.

“I’ve brought a friend who needs a friend,” Catalin said. “But if I introduce you to this person, you have to swear to secrecy. No story here for your magazine. She is in great danger. Many people would like to hurt her. No one in the world knows she’s anywhere near this continent at this moment.”

“Then why are you doing this?” I asked.

“Because she needs to tell someone her story so that if something happens to her, the truth will have been told.” Catalin clapped me on the shoulder. “Besides, she said you got me just right. Or, we can stop right now. This will never have happened.” He dropped to a whisper. “She wants to be heard, but her peculiar circumstances have made that... problematic.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll tell no one she’s here now.” I regarded the shadow in the car. “Please bring her in. I’ll put on some coffee.”

When I returned from the kitchen, Catalin was already helping a specter with enormous dark glasses—even though it was one of those early winter days where the sun was threatening never to appear—up the front steps. She was nervous and gaunt. Her chestnut hair, elegantly dressed, was slightly streaked with gray.

“Iordana Ceausescu, this is Colin, the writer I told you about,” Catalin said.

When I shook her outstretched icy hand, I had the sense she was a bird poised to take flight in a split second.

“Borila,” she said.

I wasn’t sure if this was a correction or command.

“Iordana Borila Ceausescu,” Catalin said.

She looked down, radiating a strange combination of shyness and privilege. Certainly she’d seen newsreels of Jackie Kennedy. When she lifted her chin in the air like dispossessed royalty and removed her sunglasses, purple circles around her eyes gave her a lost look. It couldn’t be. Was this the daughter-in-law of the executed dictators of Romania? I took her coat and hung it in the hall closet. What on earth was she doing here? How had she found herself in Maine? A black swallowtail in the snow.

If there were a secret Gulag hidden above New York, maybe it was Maine, thrust into the dark Atlantic Ocean like an angry fist. Not only was this northeasternmost point of the United States a border state with Canada, it was the most obscure, its face turned into the wind. The beaches were savage and icy. Once it got so cold I saw a wave freeze solid in mid-crash.

Maybe not so bad a place to hide, or be hidden. I remembered a story I’d written about captured German soldiers imprisoned in Maine as lumber crews under armed guard. “Just try and escape,”

sentries said. “Look out there. Fir trees and wolves. Take your best shot. You might just make it.”

“Did you bring her across the border from Canada?” I asked.

Catalin grinned. “Ask her. She’s right here.”

“May I address you in English?”

“I speak English, a little German, some Russian,” Iordana said. I felt relief.

“I’m better at French, Hungarian, and, of course, Romanian. Even your Maine. It was ‘wicked nice’ of you to have invited me here.” She smiled.

But, of course, I hadn’t.

Catalin squeezed her wrist. They seemed close, like friendly cousins. He turned to leave. “Maybe you’ll write a novel about her,” he said. “I’m headed to my office.”

The door clicked shut as he left. She tensed up at the low-grade rumble of a garbage truck going down the street.

“My library is upstairs,” I said. “It’s my favorite place in the house. There are fewer distractions there.”

Her voice was so soft it seemed miles away. “Okay.”

She followed me up to the well-lit library, taking in the green tile fireplace, oak wainscoting, and ancient grass wall coverings from India. I sat back at my desk. I turned my computer all the way off.

She perched on the edge of the inglenook bench with the worn velvet pad and studied the words carved into the mantel: *The Turning of the Worm*. “Shakespeare,” she said. A twinkle. “‘The smallest worm will turn being trodden on.’ My parents would have enjoyed this. An English bard’s subversive slogan carved into a Yank’s fireplace.”

“You were close to your parents, then.”

Jordana shifted in her seat. I noticed a small moth hole at the knee of her cashmere slacks. She covered it with her hand. “Do you mind if I smoke?” she asked.

“If you need to relax.” I hadn’t meant to be so rude, but both my parents had died of lung cancer. Everyone I knew had given it up, but I knew full well this was still a European thing, and I instinctively understood the smoker’s impulse to slow down and savor. “Sorry. Let me get you an ashtray.”

Because I sensed she needed the ritual of lighting up in order to gather herself, I switched to a seat across from her and opened a spiral notebook. I waited a full minute while she exhaled. Or was it a sigh? The glowing fire was still warming the room.

“What’s the first thing you’d like to tell me?” I asked.

“I can’t think of anything.”

“That’s okay. We don’t even need to talk if you don’t want to.” We sat quietly for a minute. Sometimes the most revealing remarks are those left unspoken.

“Why don’t you ask me some more questions?” she said. Another tiny smile. “Like a therapist.”

“I’m nobody’s therapist! I’m a Scorpio, so I’m too defensively barbed. Too ready to take umbrage and sting. But how about we take turns until you become more comfortable?”

Jordana waved her cigarette around the room. “Interesting. Did you do the restoration yourself?”

Had I seen on the news, the “fugitive daughter-in-law is an expert in the decorative arts”? Perhaps her question was along the lines of, do you cut your own hair? “Partly. I worry sometimes it’ll never be finished. My turn. Is it lonely being here in Maine alone?”

“I’m not alone.”

There was no chance she was ready to elaborate. When I'd been restoring my house, a chandelier I'd failed to properly secure had crashed to the floor from a high ceiling while I slept. There was no prelude or postlude, only darkness and a jumble of shattered crystal fragments scattered across the floor. Over a series of months, I'd been able to salvage the treasure by carefully piecing together the prisms, trying each in this position and that until everything seemed to fit. Maybe this was the way I could give Iordana her voice back. I would be in the dark, trying to guess what her circumstances had looked like, imagine the click of her life's disengagement, the whoosh of its descent, the sound of it smashing on the palace floor.

That was it. I would be an investigator, a detective gently questioning the survivor of a head wound—or a heart wound. I'd make a Scheherazade of her yet.

Iordana jumped at the sound of the Porsche backfiring as Catalin pulled away. Had he been there all this time?

"Where were you just now?" I picked up my pen, ready to take notes.

"I was in a car, speeding in Bucharest. There was blood on the seat."

"That must have been hard."

"I can't stand to think of it."

"Maybe you could tell me about your earliest memories growing up."

She stared into the fire.

Chapter 1

Bucharest, Romania

Reading Coffee

Under a ragged coat lies wisdom

ONE OF MY earliest memories is of Lidia, our Bessarabian gardener, coming into our house to read my mother's fortune in a coffee cup.

First, Lidia directed, "drink it down and stir what's left, because it's your future." Once my mother finished, Lidia took her cup and turned it upside down on a napkin. The silt from the thick Turkish coffee spilled down on the insides of the cup and left patterns, like lace, like rivers. Then, Lidia cradled the cup in the palms of her hands, almost in a caress. She looked deep into it the way one might look at a storm across a lake. Or into firelight.

"If a white rivulet is interrupted by a black blotch, it means something is going to happen to you on a trip."

If a smudge matched a certain pattern as the silt descended, it might be a serpent, an enemy who'd sting you in a few days, embarrass you. A dog shape meant a friend was near.

In the early 1950s, we moved into our gray stone two-story house on Herastrau No. 12, and Lidia came with us. This was the house where I remember being happy. It had been “donated” by a dispossessed Armenian merchant after the war. Upon arrival my parents discarded everything, from the stained-glass windows to a Spanish suite upholstered in red Cordoba leather and Louis XV furniture, something they came to regret later.

Biri, my pet lamb and closest friend, liked to eat the ivy that crept up the walls, and I loved to make fantasies and stories out of the vines and clouds as they ran together at the top of my window. Lidia made a pen for Biri in our tulip garden, near my seesaw.

When *Tatuca* (Daddy) Stalin died in 1953, our country went into mourning with the rest of the Communist Bloc. Special music was played on the radio for months in honor of him. But before too long, whispers on the wind suggested not everyone was so sad. Things were changing. Lidia, sensing this, began to wear a clove of garlic inside a handkerchief with knots tied in all four corners. She told us she carried it around to reverse any curses.

Though she'd substituted Socialism for religion in her girlhood, my mother began to call on Lidia more and more. Having no gun, it was the only thing she could turn to in this land of “organized atheism”. But my mother was not alone in this—before it was all over, Romanians everywhere sought answers frantically in coffee cups, tea leaves, tarot cards, even kernels of corn tossed furtively behind their desks.

Some of my mother's friends began to drop in for these early-morning coffees. They never discussed events or names, but everybody knew what it was all about. If the bottom of your cup was too white, you might be a boring person, but at least you

were safe. Sometimes Lidia would stick one of her long, tapered fingers into the black goo at the bottom of a seeker's cup and say it meant her soul was in shadow, that she had problems. If a lot of black clung to the bottom for dear life, that someone might disappear. In the new Romania, a fallen one could suffer a mysterious reversal of health during her next hospital visit. Far worse would be to survive as one of the whispered half a million souls seized via internal deportation. You could wake up in a labor colony.

Lidia peered over the edge of the cup to see if there were a storm coming, an ill wind blowing against her cheek. She stared into my eyes, seeking some sort of recognition, some hint of confirmation.

I wanted to tease my mother about it, but when Lidia saw this on my face she asked if I wanted my coffee read, too.

I refused. Even then I was very secretive, very private, didn't want to share my life with anybody. I never wanted to believe that my fate was already written, because I was afraid it would be true.

Immersed in his government papers, my father, Jordan "Petre" Borila, would have nothing to do with this *prostii*, this nonsense, whatsoever. Soothsaying was frowned upon by the government. Whenever he saw Lidia in conference with my mother, he only shook his head.

As Ministru, he was a key member of the Socialist Republic of Romania's Central Committee. Half Bulgarian and half Romanian, he grew up with grenades around his waist but no shoes. During the Spanish Civil War he was shot in the upper left leg, the hunk of flesh cut from him the size of a soup can in order to include the bullet, without anesthesia. He'd then come back and fought alongside my mother in the Divizia Tudor Vladimirescu, a special Romanian unit formed in the Soviet

Union to overthrow Axis control of Romania and fascism in general. Finished with Romania, they'd swept the *fascisti* from Hungaria to Czechoslovakia.

Sometimes, he'd come to see me, his namesake daughter, after I was asleep during the many long nights he worked late at party meetings or returned halfway to morning from visiting factories as far off as Brasov. He'd bring me tiny treats—bon-bons; Romanian pearl-shaped candies in a small metal box; or, my favorite, Soviet “Mishka” chocolates rolled in pretty papers adorned with pictures of two or three bears. In Russia, my father whispered to me in his gruff, sweet voice, all bears were nicknamed “Mishka”, “Mikey”.

Other than these precious moments, I knew it would be wrong to expect my parents to have much more time for me. Ecaterina, my revolutionary journalist mother, was forever charging ahead with the surge of current events. Imprisoned at 16 in Tirgu Mures for distributing handbills, she rose to fame as a news correspondent covering the War to Reunify Korea.

One early morning she came and stood in my doorway before heading off to her job as editor in chief of *Elore* (Forward). When she looked around my room, it wasn't just a look. The shadows of our two bodyguards passed behind her. She leaned over, and I thought she was going to kiss me. Instead she said, “Be grateful someone will make your nice bed. The furniture in our old house was made by political prisoners.”

I tried to picture our old house, but all I could see was Lidia's rainbow of coffee cups, white, green, pink, yellow, blue, with small matching saucers. I remembered Lidia's blonde hair and very large hands as she turned the cup in her powerful palm. I tried to see the figures she saw, but I couldn't.

12 • Red Hands

Like the rest of Bucharest, we were “wide asleep”, unsuspecting of the dangers of the mist that was slowly encircling us. Back then we hadn’t yet seen the *scinteia*, the sparkle of the monster Nicolae Ceausescu was to become. Strike that. The monster *I* was to become.