

CHAPTER ONE

THE THEFT

Bucharest, Romania, 1920

The descending late autumn sun, fighting a losing battle against the advancing hordes of encroaching clouds, offered an opportune moment for the theft of the baby to succeed. Gunari's watchful, brown Roma eyes peered out from the safeguarding shadows of an empty doorway in preparation for the deed. Inhaling and exhaling in a slow and rhythmic attempt at calming his nerves, he gazed northward toward the glorious yet fading outline of the Bucegi mountains, seeking the strength he needed to pounce, steal, and escape.

A mere three days before, no such thought of attempting anything of this magnitude existed in Gunari's mind. Riding into town on his wagon that day, he mumbled to himself in frustration over his tardiness, caused by an old horse in the stages of going lame. Promising his client the delivery of mended shoes before his late arrival time, he received a tongue-lashing and an unveiled threat to seek another cobbler. Fearing the loss of business, something Gunari couldn't afford with a baby on the way, he lessened the agreed-upon price of the repair, settling for half the original amount.

Seething and cursing his fate as he returned to his wagon, a dour-faced yet well-dressed stranger approached him in the street.

"Could I interest you in making some money?" the man asked.

Turning around to respond, Gunari felt an immediate sense of discomfort looking into the man's dark, cavernous eyes, staring at him with an intensity that seemed both questioning and condemning. Without understanding why, and despite his sudden unease, Gunari experienced a

strange inability to turn away from the stranger's penetrating gaze, which gave the impression of looking *through* him rather than *at* him. Wearing a black, cone-shaped sheepskin hat, an embroidered, knee-length white linen shirt, pleated black trousers, and black-and-red leather shoes, the man appeared to have money. Curious and vulnerable, Gunari asked, "What do you have in mind?"

The man smiled and took a step closer before pointing toward the horse.

"I couldn't help noticing his crooked stance," he said. "Your horse is wearing down and those legs are getting weak. Anyone who knows horses could tell you that the poor thing doesn't have much left to give."

"You're telling me something I already know, mister," Gunari said. "But it costs a lot of money for a horse, the kind of money I don't have. You plan on offering me that much?"

The man tilted his head and winked.

"How about enough to buy a strong, young, Gypsy Vanner?" he asked. "And not only that, still have money left over to buy a whole new set of cobbler's tools, which I'm sure you need as well."

Gunari's mouth dropped a slight bit, taken aback by the unexpected offer to make enough money to purchase the most desirable horse around. Listening to the stranger's dialect, one containing an accent spoken near the border of Bulgaria, where Gunari's Vlach Romani community previously lived, offered a possible clue as to his background.

"How did you know I need new tools?" he asked.

"I know things, Gunari," the man replied, speaking in a calm yet assertive tone.

Gunari's eyes narrowed. "How did you know my name?"

“I know many names of the Vlach Romani,” he answered. “But what’s important is my offer and whether you’ll take me up on it.”

“Go ahead,” Gunari said. “I’m listening.”

“I want you to kidnap a baby,” the man told him. “A specific male baby that I’ve chosen.”

Gunari gasped, his eyes widening in startled disbelief.

“*What?*” he cried. “Steal a baby? I couldn’t do that.”

“Even knowing how much your life will change for the better?” the man asked. “Do you think another opportunity like this will ever come along? A new horse, new tools, and a future of great promise for your growing family.”

“Why do you say my growing family?” Gunari asked. “Have you been spying on me?”

“Just listen to what I tell you,” the man replied. “You will deliver the baby to me in the Băneasa Forest near your campground. Follow the winding path for about twenty minutes and you’ll come to a small field of grass before the trees continue. I’ll be waiting there with the money.”

The man smiled as he peered into Gunari’s eyes. “Waiting with the money *and* with expectations.”

“I...I don’t know if I can do this.”

“But you will,” the man replied. “I’m sure of it.”

A troubling, lightheaded sensation overcame Gunari as he suddenly struggled to keep his balance on shaky legs. But the more he thought about replacing his old, crippled horse with a Gypsy Vanner, combined with the benefits of modern tools to quicken his repair work, the more this man’s proposal intrigued him. Despite attempting something so dangerous and unpleasant,

he decided then and there that his livelihood and family, his *growing* family, outweighed everything else.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

The man smiled again, unnerving Gunari in an unexplainable manner and forcing him to look away—something he felt unable to do moments before.

“Very good,” the man said. “I knew you’d come to your senses. In three days, on Thursday afternoon, the mother will come to the market with her baby. Get there at three o’clock and wait. Be patient, she’ll come.”

The man reached into his pocket.

“Here’s a photograph of her pushing the baby stroller, a distinctive, black-hooded type, so there will be no mistaking the target. The mother’s face is clear to see, so you’ll know exactly who to look for.”

“How do you know she’ll be there on Thursday?” Gunari asked. “And after three?”

“I just know,” the man answered.

Standing several inches taller than Gunari’s five-foot, nine-inch frame, the man glared down, his face no more than a foot away and commanding the Romani’s complete attention.

“It must be this boy,” he said, pointing his finger at the stroller. “Understand me, Gunari. This is the one I want.”

* * *

Although the cooling temperature of this Bucharestian October day required sweaters or jackets of the passerby, trickles of sweat formed beneath the bill of Gunari’s flat wool cap. Discarding his usual broad-brimmed hat, a requirement for his Vlach Romani attire, he wanted to avoid any cultural attention grabber. Wiping the drops away with the sleeve of his overcoat, he gazed in

uncertainty at the lower portion of his disguise. The modern-day tapered pants, tucked into ill-fitting boots that squeezed his feet, replaced his usual baggy-styled black pants and black closed shoes. Another clothing obligation, his waistcoat with silver buttons, also remained a purposefully missing connection. Although he continued to rationalize the importance in doing this, the reality of the moment made him question his readiness.

The market stall stood in a thinly populated section of the north side, where the asphalt streets and final row of buildings led to a patchwork combination of cobblestone pathways and narrow, unpaved roads. At the end of those roads, about a four-to-five-minute walk from the market, a long row of uneven green shrubs ranging in height from seven to ten feet, blocked the view of the large dirt field beyond. It was there, in those fields, at the outskirts of town, where Gunari lived with his wife in their *vardo*, his wagon, alongside the others of his Vlach Romani clan. Looking ahead to the short time remaining until his wife delivered their first child—the first of several they wanted, he believed his livelihood, and the future of his family, depended on the next few minutes. The disastrous consequences of getting caught was something he couldn't stop thinking about, like continuing to hear the rattling of bolted doors and windows during a howling windstorm.

Watching the mother approaching the market with the baby sitting up in a hooded black stroller, accompanied by another woman pushing hers in a dark blue pram, Gunari overheard their conversation, discovering that the name of his intended target was Petre. From his two previous days of observation, all the women who brought their babies here left them halfway in and side by side at the far right-hand section of the tent entrance. Gunari anticipated these women following the same routine, which they ultimately did, before walking together toward

the last stall located on the opposite end. That section contained the more expensive food items, unaffordable for his people.

He didn't care for any of these women or their babies. They weren't Romani like him; they were gorgios, a term the Romani used to label anyone not of their kind. Gorgios looked down on his people, referring to them with the derogatory term, "Gypsies" and believing they were nothing more than thieves and lazy beggars. Although most of the Romani males worked in respected occupations such as blacksmiths, farm laborers, horse traders, musicians, and his own specialty, cobbling shoes, the suspicious looks and disrespectful treatment they continued to receive motivated him and steeled his conviction.

The market's location offered a stark contrast to the crowds and activity of Bucharest's main thoroughfare about a half mile away. Although this lessened the chance of being spotted, even if successful, the possibility remained that the mother might hear the baby cry as he fled. Still, the alternative of just grabbing the infant from the stroller seemed like a more dangerous option. Knowing he'd need to lift the baby into his arms in a rushed and ungentle manner seemed like an open invitation for sudden wailing.

And getting caught.

To avoid capture if seen escaping, Gunari accepted the possibility of abandoning the baby and running back toward the darkened alleyway that veered to the right between the last two buildings on the street. The similar heights of both structures blocked out any sunlight there, even in summer. The alley's back end led to the final group of hedges and the walking path leading to the Romani encampment several minutes away. The opposite side of the field, behind the living area, led to the larger trail for their wagons to come and go.

Taking his first step forward, he halted as the women stopped to chat with Simza, the talkative, gray-haired, mustachioed owner of the store.

“Shut up, Simza,” he muttered.

In another two, maybe three minutes, they resumed their stroll, further distancing themselves from their babies in the extended enclosure. Although Simza supplied enough illumination under the tent to provide sufficient visibility, the increasing cloud layer, coupled with the late afternoon’s naturally diminishing light produced no better than a fuzzy clarity along the periphery. Gunari counted on this to help him remain as inconspicuous as possible.

Creeping closer, Gunari took advantage of the near blackness provided by a large adjacent awning as he darted to a spot behind a horse-drawn carriage tied to a signpost. No more than fifteen feet separated him from the babies, with Petre’s stroller the closer of the two—an advantage, knowing, as he did, that every second counted. Taking one more look at the women’s location, he hesitated again as another woman exited the market, waving goodbye to Simza and laughing at something he said before stopping to look and make stupid sounds at the babies.

As she walked away, Gunari closed his eyes and whispered a prayer. “I ask your help, God. I’m doing it for my family. I hope you understand and forgive me.”

It was time.

Adrenaline surging, Gunari moved at a rapid pace toward the stroller, but he didn’t run for fear of drawing attention to himself. Keeping his eyes focused on the two preoccupied women discussing a food item with Simza, Gunari placed his hand around the steel handle and maneuvered the carriage in a half circle. Without looking back, he broke into a fast walk toward the invisibility of another awning’s extended shadow.

Scanning his surroundings and listening for screams from behind, the nervous anticipation of hearing something drove him to increase his speed, with each second bringing him closer to destination or capture. Reaching the shrubbery leading to the walking path, where his sister, Lavinia, waited, his heartbeat slowed, his breathing deepened, and the determination to complete the mission strengthened his resolve.

The baby's muted cries, starting before Gunari reached the alleyway, signaled his awakening and an impending need for feeding. He had foreseen this possibility, and Lavinia, her breasts still full with a newborn of her own, offered them in advance upon his return. Nobody else knew of the theft, not even his wife, for fear of upsetting her so close to giving birth—and the unwanted persuasiveness of likely disapproval. His sister refused to hear any of the details of the plan and provided no encouragement for the idea, but knowing that her brother needed a new horse to maintain his business had convinced Lavinia to help.

The quiet of the empty field brought the soft, musical jangling of the miniature yellow and gold bells hanging from Lavinia's left ear, announcing her approaching arrival. Reaching the stroller and peering down at the baby, Lavinia's eyes widened in a simultaneous drawing in of a sudden, quick breath.

"*Gunari*," she said, through an alarmed breathiness he resented, "what have you done?"

"What do you mean, what have I done?" he snapped, his head jerking back in confusion. "Exactly what I said I would do."

The increased crying from the awake and hungry baby irritated Gunari further, and when he leaned down to lift him, Lavinia nudged him away, giving her own baby to him and bringing the crying one to her chest.

"I'll feed the baby, but then we must return him immediately."

“*What?*” Gunari roared. “Are you crazy? This kid is going to make me enough money to buy that Gypsy Vanner. And new tools, too. I thought you understood that.”

“I did,” she replied, “but I didn’t expect you to bring Petre.”

Gunari’s eyes narrowed in confusion as he stared at Lavinia.

“How do you know his name?”

Bouncing the baby in her arms, Lavinia looked down at his tiny face.

“His mother is Naomi, our midwife,” she explained. “She’s delivered every baby here since the time we arrived.” Nodding her chin upward toward her own baby, she added,

“Including my little Manfri!”

“But how do you know it’s hers?” he asked. “This...this Naomi. There must be a lot of babies that look like him.”

Lavinia shook her head.

“No, Gunari, it’s not the baby that lets me know,” she said, annoyance in her voice. “It’s the blanket he’s wrapped in. Look.”

Lavinia held out the baby toward her brother.

“Naomi made this blanket. You can see it’s handmade in the colors of the Romanian flag. When she was pregnant, she still came to deliver our babies, and she told us she was making one exactly like this—a blue, yellow, and red crocheted blanket. So this must be it. It has to be. This little one is the midwife’s baby, and we must bring him back to her.”

An immediate surge of heat spread from Gunari’s forehead down across his eyes, causing them to sting and moisten. This couldn’t be happening. The cries from the baby increased in volume. Turning away from Gunari, Lavinia took several steps down the path before undoing her vest, unbuttoning her silk blouse, and suckling the baby.

“And if I don’t agree to what you say, then what?” he asked, struggling to sound defiant despite a growing sense of doubt.

“You might not be wanted here anymore,” Lavinia answered. “Our voivode, Motshan, may tell you to leave. He is our leader, and we listen to him. Naomi is a gorgio, but she is respected and appreciated for what she’s done for us.” Keeping her back to him, Lavinia turned her head to look at her brother. “And it’s not just the women who feel that way.”

Gunari lowered his head for several moments, feeling a strangling sense of defeat. Motshan, the clan’s chieftain, might do as Lavinia warned, especially if Gunari’s actions led to further tension between the Romani and the citizens of Bucharest. If that happened, everyone’s livelihood could be affected. He straightened and took a deep breath, pondering the inescapable irony of the darkening gray clouds bringing the curtain down on the fragmented remnants of blue.

“I have a plan that I hope will make this right,” Lavinia said, the baby’s mouth still attached to her nipple, “but I need you to hurry and put your Romani clothes back on. Naomi must be going crazy. We’ll tell her we found him in the alley and I recognized the carriage. We’ll look like a couple of good Gypsies returning her baby but don’t know anything else.”

From a concealed area buried under fallen leaves at the base of a nearby oak tree, Gunari retrieved the bag of the discarded clothes he removed earlier: the wide-brimmed hat, the dark overcoat, the waistcoat with silver buttons, and the loose-fitting black pants. With the extended, low-lying canopy providing the cover he required to change, they departed within a few minutes and headed back toward the market.

Not more than thirty seconds after reappearing from the alleyway, they first heard a woman scream, “Petre!” before seeing Naomi rushing toward them, her arms outstretched in a

frantic gesture of need. Grabbing the baby and sweeping him into her arms before clutching him to her chest, Naomi's sobs continued to fill the air as she turned and walked away, distancing herself from the two of them. When Simza and the other woman with the pram approached and viewed the scene, they both leered at Gunari and Lavinia before heading toward Naomi, each placing a hand on a separate shoulder. Simza whispered something before turning around and, with a gait stiff and accusatory, moved in like a policeman to pull the carriage away.

"*Cum indraznesti*," he muttered, telling them, "How dare you," through teeth clenched in disgust.

Grabbing Lavinia's arm, Gunari said, "Let's get out of here. It's not safe."

Lavinia's dark eyes flashed revulsion at her brother. Defiant and angry, she held Manfri in one arm and pulled away from his grip with the other. She approached Naomi, one cautious step followed by another leading her to within ten feet of the midwife.

"Naomi," she said, her voice cracking, "it's me, Lavinia. I'm so sorry this happened to you. We...we were in the field when we heard the baby crying. He was in the alley back there."

"You're lying!" Naomi's friend shouted. "And you should leave now."

Simza stared at Lavinia in silence, but his hateful expression caused her to question their safety, just as Gunari feared. Walking away and eager to leave, she heard Naomi's voice.

"Wait."

Lavinia glanced at Gunari before turning around. Naomi approached her, staring through brown eyes markedly bloodshot and puffy. Disheveled strands of her neck-length auburn hair hung limp and sticky from underneath her headscarf.

"I remember you, Lavinia," she said, her voice hoarse but clear. "How's your baby? Manfri is his name, right?"

Lavinia smiled. “Yes,” she answered, looking down at him. “He’s doing fine, thank you.”

Naomi took a deep breath, her stare remaining unmoving as a spotlight.

“I don’t know what happened and I’m not going to go to the police,” she said. “Many of you are good people, and you’ve been kind to me. The women I’ve met...I saw their babies take their first breath...I know what will happen to all of you if the police come, and I don’t want to bring that kind of trouble.”

Wrapping her arms in a tighter embrace around Petre, she lowered her face and kissed the child before continuing. “I’m quite aware of the persecution the Romani face here. I see it on the streets and in the shops. I hear it in the things people say, even those I know and consider my friends. But I’ll tell you something else, Lavinia. We Romanian Jews also know persecution. We also understand what it’s like to be hated, to feel unwelcome, to be looked upon as people who can’t be trusted.”

Wiping away a tear, she gazed outward again toward Gunari, holding his gaze for several moments before looking back at Lavinia and offering a sad smile.

“My last name is Levy,” she said, “a very Jewish name. In Romania, right here in Bucharest, that’s caused a lot of problems for my husband and me. What happened today has nothing to do with being Jewish, but I see it as an omen. We already had decided to leave Romania to join my sister and her family. And now, after what happened to my baby, it can’t come soon enough.”

Furrowing her eyebrows, Lavinia asked, “Where are you going?”

“Far away from here,” Naomi answered. “To America.”