



GOD'S SECRET AGENT



Diane Yoder

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AGENT

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Dedication

To the supreme Author of this story,
who guided my thoughts as I wrote it.
May He receive all the honor and glory.

To Nicu and Monica,
for their faithfulness to our unlimited God.

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From the Story

Romania, 1988

Pale light shrouded the city of Simeria as Nicu drove toward it. At 5:00 a.m. there were only faint stirrings of life in the streets. He shifted in his seat, forcing his heavy eyes to stay open. He had been driving all night from Germany to Romania. The other three passengers were sleeping, and the large motor home was silent. He longed to rest as well, but he knew he had to keep going and deliver all his goods.

Straightening, Nicu gazed ahead. The city's main street was only a few meters away now. Railroad ties ran across the road, with stones lying between the tracks. Scanning the mostly empty street, Nicu decided to cross the tracks and enter Simeria.

He was halfway across when he realized his mistake. The camper's wheels sank down into the stones between the ties and the axle caught on the track, bringing the vehicle to a dead stop. Try as he might, Nicu could not make it move, forward or backward.

Then it happened.

The first low rumbling sound made Nicu freeze. Within moments the long train was speeding around a distant corner, its whistle blasting. As the deep, mournful sound echoed around him, Nicu punched the pedal in one last desperate effort to move. Nothing.

The train's whistle sounded again. It would soon bear down upon him—and he could not move. So this was it. After all his hard labor to fulfill the calling God had laid on his shoulders, leaving his beloved wife and children at home month after month, it would end like this!

1

A Protecting Hand

He was such a little lad, only six years old, marching into church with his grandmother on Sunday morning. Though no one had told him to do so, he went through every aisle to shake hands with people. “*Pace*,”¹ he would say, returning their greetings. Smiles followed him when he left to sit with the other children. How many little boys came to church with their grandmother before the rest of the family arrived? It was obvious that Nicolae Craiovan loved it.

He had such a good example in his godly *bunica* (grandmother), who often began singing while people were still arriving. His grandfather had been the first Christian in the town of Moldova Nouă, and a minister until his death in 1947. His parents were faithful church members. This little lad came from a good family, strong in their faith. Already he showed promise of following in their footsteps.

Nicu² knew that being from a Christian family set him apart from the villagers, who were of the traditional Orthodox faith. “Repentants,” they called his people. It was a bad word among Orthodox society, and Christians were often persecuted for their faith.³ But in their home village of Câmpia, Romania, his parents were well-liked and respected. His mother had a heart

¹ Romanian word for “peace.” For pronunciation of foreign words, see page 247.

² Shortened form of “Nicolae.”

³ The Romanian Orthodox Church is the second-largest of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches, the Russian Orthodox Church being larger. Approximately 85% of Romania’s people are members by virtue of being baptized into this church as infants. The Orthodox Church practices a ritualistic worship, with icons being an important aspect. In contrast, “Repentants” are evangelical in emphasis, focusing on faith and repentance as well as the baptism of believing adults. Repentants are generally of the Baptist denomination.

for the poor, reaching out to those in need. His father, Petre, stood firmly for what he believed. With five brothers and his sweet *bunica* who lived with them, Nicu was content with his world.

Sunrays slanted through the clouds, reaching to earth with an ethereal glow. The wagon swayed and jolted along the road, pulled by plodding oxen. Nicu sat up straight in his seat, swinging his legs back and forth. Though his *tata* (father) was a mason, he owned portions of farmland outside the village. Nicu liked going along to the fields, where wheat and corn grew tall and golden.

Petre Craiovan strode alongside the wagon, driving the oxen. Nicu's brother Ieremia rode beside him, his brown eyes shining. At eight, he was a year and a half older than Nicu. "Did you see that baby rabbit in the corn? I want to catch one sometime and raise it," he confided.

Nicu grinned. "I'd like to take care of sheep. I saw a boy with his flock today."

"Hey!" Ieremia pointed suddenly. "There goes a rabbit!"

"Where?" Without thinking, Nicu jumped to his feet.

"Watch out!" Tata's shouted warning came too late. As the wagon hit a bump, Nicu's small body catapulted over the side, landing in front of the wagon. There was no time to stop, no time to get out of the way. The wagon's steel wheels rolled directly over Nicu, and when the dust cleared, he was lying still in the middle of the road.

"Nicu!" Tata stopped the oxen and ran toward his son. Kneeling, he lifted him in both arms. "Nicu, can you hear me?"

Nicu's eyes opened slowly. He looked into Tata's scared face, and then at Ieremia, who was hovering over them. "I'm okay," he stated, and the simple words brought tears to Tata's eyes. Nicu looked at him wonderingly. Tata, strong and stoic, seldom cried.

Tata's arms tightened around Nicu. " 'For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways,' " he quoted, his voice husky with emotion. "The Lord protected you, my son. Hallelujah!"

It was Christmas Day, and holiday cheer filled the air. When Nicu went outside, snow laced the streets and house roofs with intricate patterns. In many lighted windows up and down the street, he could see trees decorated for Christmas. Nicu knew that some families wrapped long candies in foil paper and hung them on the tree. Though there would be no gifts at his house, there would be candy.

They would also have a big Christmas dinner. His mother had been cooking all morning. Earlier that winter they had butchered a pig, and Catarina had divided the meat into jars and heated lard to put into them. The lard would preserve the meat until March, but today they would eat some of it. With mashed potatoes, beans, bread, and cheese, the meal would be a feast.

Nicu's mouth watered just thinking about it. Opening the door, he burst into the kitchen.

Catarina was bending over the stove, her face flushed from the heat. She smiled down at him. "Are you ready to recite a poem for us tonight, Nicu?"

His hazel eyes lit up at his mother's question. On Christmas Eve their family held a church service in their home. He was used to reciting poems; he had recited one the night before in church when the congregation had gathered to celebrate Christmas. Afterward the children had gone out into the streets to sing carols for people. He still had some nuts in his pocket from the treats people had given in return.

"Maybe Nicu would rather sing," said Bunica, her eyes twinkling. She was sitting near the woodstove, holding two-year-old Samuel. "What did you sing when you went caroling last night?"

“We sang ‘Silent Night.’” Nicu remembered the way the children’s voices rang out in the still, frosty air. “I stood beside Feri.”

“Ferdinand, the little German boy?” Bunica smiled. “He’s your good friend, isn’t he?”

“The boys often play together in the streets,” Catarina remarked. “They’ll be in the same grade at school.”

The door opened, letting in Tata and Ilie with a gust of cold air. “*Brrr!* It’s frigid out there,” Ilie exclaimed. Taking off his boots, he came to the woodstove. “I thought I was going to freeze while we were milking.” Ilie, ten years old, often helped Tata milk the cows. He would leave in another year to attend school in a different village, but that seemed like a long time away.

Tata came to stand beside Mama. “Is the meal ready, Catarina?”

She glanced up with a smile. “Almost.” Dishing the mashed potatoes into a bowl, she turned around. “Come, boys, sit down at the table.”

Nicu hurried to join Ieremia and Pavel on the bench along the wall. Pavel was four, and Nicu always looked out for him. That was how they did things in their family—the older watched over the younger. Bunica placed Samuel into his high chair and then helped Mama carry the rest of the food to the table. After Tata and Ilie finished washing up, they joined the family.

That evening Tata read the story of Jesus’ birth from the Bible. One by one the boys stood against the door, reciting poems and singing. The room became a hallowed place, its sacred beauty folding gently over Nicu.

He lay awake for a long time that night, gazing out the window. The sky was dotted with millions of stars gleaming bright and friendly high above. Maybe this night was like the one when Jesus was born. He heard Bunica singing in the kitchen, “Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright . . .”

He wished he could have seen the angels who came to the shepherds with the glad tidings of Jesus’ birth. He wished he could have seen the wise men who came to Jesus with their gifts. He wished . . . he wished . . .

Nicu jerked awake. The house was dark, but Bunica was still singing, more softly now. “Radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord, at thy birth . . .”

He smiled dreamily. The music made life beautiful.

Nicu sat beside Pavel on the bench behind the table, writing with a pencil. With swift, sure strokes, he wrote his name—N-i-c-o-l-a-e. He was seven now and would soon be going to school, but his mother had already taught him how to spell his name.

Glancing up, Nicu watched Pavel for a moment. Pavel had drawn a house and was now adding trees around it. “Hey, Pavel,” Nicu said, scooting closer. “Give me your pencil.”

“Why?” Pavel looked up.

“It’s bigger than mine. You can have this one.” Nicu tossed the pencil he had been using toward Pavel.

Pavel shook his head. “I don’t want it.”

Nicu straightened. “I’m older than you, so I should have the bigger pencil.” His voice held a warning that Pavel chose to ignore. He turned away from Nicu and started wriggling down from the bench.

To Nicu, this was the final straw. Reaching out, he grabbed for the pencil. Pavel resisted and gave his older brother a shove. Losing his balance, Nicu tumbled off the bench. Dimly he heard Pavel shout, but he was already bouncing down the cellar steps nearby. Pain jolted through his body, and everything whirled around him. Then his head struck the cellar floor and everything went black.

At the top of the stairs, Pavel stared down at his older brother in horror. He hadn’t realized the cellar steps were so close! What would Mama say when she found out? He must hide!

When Catarina found her son in the cellar, he was moaning. Blood

stained the floor around his head. She cried out and rushed to his side, lifting him carefully in her arms. Then they raced to the doctor.

"This could have been bad," the doctor said after he examined the small boy. "He's hurt on the front and back of his head, but it won't affect his brain." He shook his head.

"The Lord protected him," Catarina said, her voice trembling.

"Well, a protecting hand is definitely over him," the doctor said as he dismissed them.

Nicu held Mama's hand tightly as they went out the door. He still felt light-headed and weak, but the doctor's words had sent his spirit soaring. The Lord was watching over him!

Bible in hand, Nicu approached the church doors. The morning service was over, and he was eager to go outside with his friends. He felt especially excited—he had been asked to sing a solo in the choir in a couple weeks. He wasn't afraid, for he loved singing.

"Nicu?" The gentle voice made him turn. Ani stood behind him, smiling. Christina stood beside her, watching him with kind eyes. Nicu liked these ladies who'd arranged a choir and orchestra for the children. Both were single, and people said they didn't want to get married, but only work for the Lord.

Nicu hesitated. What did they want with him?

"Can you stay here a moment?" Christina asked. "We want to talk with you and your parents." With that, she walked over to Nicu's parents.

Nicu saw the questioning looks on his parents' faces as Christina talked with them. Then they both smiled and came toward him with Christina. "Why don't we go into the room where we practice singing with the children?" Ani suggested, turning to lead the way.

Still wondering what was happening, Nicu followed the others into the

room. Closing the door, Christina spoke softly to him. “Ani and I have seen how active you are in the church, Nicu. We want to pray that you will preach the Gospel further.”

His eyes widened. Preach the Gospel? He was only eight years old! But he knelt obediently on the floor, putting his hands together and closing his eyes. Christina prayed first, and then Ani, asking God to bless Nicu and lead him to become a missionary.

When Nicu looked up, both ladies were smiling at him. There were tears in Mama’s eyes, and Tata was holding out his hand. “Come,” he said, his hand closing lovingly over Nicu’s small one. “It’s time to go now.”

Nicu was quiet on the walk home. What had he done that stood out to Ani and Christina? He loved going to church and liked participating in church activities, but he hadn’t known anyone was watching.

Birds sang in the trees. The sun shone brilliantly. The words that Christina and Ani had prayed gave Nicu an inner strength and joy whenever he thought of them. This was a powerful event in his life; it had happened just for him and none of the other children. Was it truly possible that he would someday preach the Gospel? Be a missionary?

Home was coming into sight ahead. Dismissing his thoughts, Nicu raced his brothers to the gate. There would be time to ponder these things later.

2

Through Tears

“Petre, it doesn’t work the same way anymore. You have to give in.”

The official spoke with authority, his posture stiff and straight. Nicu looked from the official to his father, who was standing impassively beside him. What would happen next?

All around them people had been joining the collective farm as the Communists took over their land. Some ran into the woods to hide rather than sign the paper that forced them to give up their land. Others committed suicide rather than sinking into poverty.

Petre did not want to join the collective farm. His own land provided well for their family. With the cows’ milk they could make cheese, butter, and cream. In the cellar they kept potatoes, vegetables, and cornmeal. They had land outside the village to grow crops. They raised pigs, goats, sheep, and chickens. Ducks and geese completed their little farm. All this would be taken away if he gave in.

But now, Petre Craiovan knew he had no choice. With a trembling hand he took the pen to sign, and tears came to Nicu’s eyes. Tata was the last one in the village to give up his freedom. It was 1960.

The official was soon gone, leaving a heavy sadness hanging over the family. As the days passed and the animals were taken away, anger began mixing with the pain in Nicu’s heart. *Why did the Communists do this?* All

but one of their seven cows were taken, and now they seldom drank delicious warm milk because it had to be saved for cheese. They could do no gardening; there was only a small piece of land outside the village to farm.

"Nicu, please read Romans 8:28 from the Bible," Catarina said one morning. She stood at the stove, cooking cornmeal and eggs. She worked almost mechanically, the sparkle in her eyes gone.

Nicu turned the pages carefully. Mama often asked him to read aloud from the Bible when she was working in the kitchen. On Sundays she fasted all day, praying for Tata, her children, and the church. On those days she would ask Nicu to taste the food to determine if it needed more salt. "He's the girl in the house," Mama sometimes laughed in reference to Nicu's discerning palate. But there was little laughter these days. How Nicu longed to see his mother's eyes sparkle again!

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose," Nicu read slowly. He glanced up. Mama brushed away a tear and stirred the cornmeal a few minutes longer.

"All things," she said softly at length. "That's what God promises. All things."

Weeks passed, and life for the Craiovals settled into a new normal. Nicu's parents accepted the change. Bunica's peaceful voice did not falter when she said, "The Lord has promised never to leave or forsake us." Nicu didn't doubt it. His parents and grandmother took the Bible literally, and in this they found life-sustaining joy.

"Are you boys ready for church?"

Mama's call was usually enough to spur Nicu into action, but now he made no answer. Slowly he put down his comb, a frown furrowing his brow.

"Nicu?" His brother Samuel nudged him. "You had better hurry." Then

he looked closer at Nicu's face. "Is something wrong?"

"I'll get a bad mark in school for going to church today." Nicu's voice was so quiet that Samuel had to lean forward to hear. "All the students are supposed to go to school on Sundays, you know. From there the teachers take them to a concert. Whoever doesn't go gets punished."

"They only do that so we can't go to church."

"I know. But sometimes I get tired of being treated differently." There was pain in Nicu's eyes as he turned to his brother. "They look down on us just because—"

"Boys!" Mama's call came again, more urgent this time.

Nicu straightened his shoulders. "Coming," he called back. He was always ready to go to church. That hadn't changed in spite of the ridicule he faced at school. He was in fourth grade now, and each year found him at the top of his class. Though he made friends easily, being from a Repentant family set him apart.

The forested hillsides, cloaked in autumn russets and golds, shook off Nicu's melancholy as he walked down the street toward church with his family. He didn't care too much about the pressures at school when he could look forward to a wonderful time at church. His steps quickened. There would be singing and good preaching, and he would stand up front to recite a poem from memory.

He enjoyed the church service that day, but the world at school was always there to cast a shadow over Nicu's life. Christmas was another season that the school celebrated differently from the church. Teachers spent time teaching their students poems and songs for a Christmas program that celebrated communism, and the children decorated the hall with pine branches and streamers made from colored paper. Many people gathered in the village hall on the appointed evening, filling a vast area of seats.

"Are you ready for tonight?" Nicu asked Feri as they waited with the other children behind the curtain.

"I think so." Feri glanced toward the curtain and took a deep breath.

“What are you scared of?” Nicu asked nonchalantly. “Reciting poems is easy.”

Feri shot him a look. “Maybe for you, but not for me!”

Nicu grinned. With a red necktie, white shirt, and dark pants, he and Feri were dressed like all the other boys around them. The colors of their outfits symbolized communism. The girls also wore red ties, white blouses, and dark blue skirts. But all this made no difference to Nicu. He had a plan.

The curtain was lifting. It was time for the program to start.

Nicu filed out with the others. When they saw the overcrowded hall, some of the children began crying and darted back behind the curtain without giving their pieces. But Nicu, accustomed to reciting poems before big crowds in church, wasn't afraid. He stood calmly, waiting his turn.

At last it was time. Stepping to the front of the platform, Nicu straightened, standing erect. His wavy brown hair shone in the fluorescent lighting as he looked up toward the ceiling and began reciting:

Jesus, you came into the world
O holy and divine child,
To take away the sins
That prevail on earth.

Gasps came from the audience. What was this little boy doing?

You came, but not in glory;
You were born in a humble manger.
This was the will of the heavenly Father;
Peace and goodwill to men you brought.

You healed the sick,
Blind, and crippled.
Yet the treacherous, evil world
Would ask that you die.

Nicu's voice rang out, clear and strong. There was no sound from the audience. Moving his gaze from the ceiling to the crowd in front of him, he made a sweeping gesture with his hands toward the audience.

But, oh evil world, you know
That He will come again;
Not for salvation,
But for judgment.

And then, when you stand in front
Of Him whom you have crucified,
What will you answer
When He says, "I do not know you"?⁴

Nicu paused, his eyes scanning the crowd. His parents and his *bunica*, sitting near the back of the room, had heard him recite the poem last Sunday night in church. He knew they would not chide him for reciting it again that night.

There was one thing left to do. Nicu bowed and walked behind the curtain.

Everyone clapped.

While most of Nicu's teachers never degraded him for what he had done at their Christmas program, he quickly discovered that Miss Mariana would. The fifth-grade teacher who taught the Russian language class was a staunch Communist who came from the southern part of Romania where the president lived. At twenty-seven, she was unmarried and had just finished college. She kept order in her classroom with a stern hand.

Nicu shifted his position on the bench. Invigorating breezes drifted

⁴ Author unknown.

through the open window, inviting him outside. But only after school was dismissed would he be free to play football with his brothers and friends in the street. Right now he had to study for a test.

“Repentant!” The strident hiss in his ear jerked Nicu from his studying. As he looked up, something flashed in his teacher’s hand, and the pointed tip of a spindle punched his ear. Nicu’s hand flew upward and came away sticky with blood. He stared after Miss Mariana as she stalked away. A hush fell over the classroom as the other students watched in stunned silence.

Nicu bowed his head, tears starting to his eyes from the pain in his ear. But there was an even deeper pain in his heart. Being from a Christian family had always set him apart from the other students. Some didn’t want to be friends with him, and it was common for the teachers to give him lower grades than he deserved. Now this had happened. But there was nothing he could do to change his circumstances. The teachers had high authority over the children, and he could get a bad mark if he reported it.

Nicu managed to shake off the bad memory for a while that evening as he played football with his brothers and friends. But he slipped in early to be with Mama in the kitchen as she cooked supper. When she asked him to read once again from the Bible, Nicu hurried to where the book lay on the shelf. He lifted it reverently and carried it back to his chair.

“Why don’t you read from Matthew 5:10-12 tonight?” Catarina asked. She salted the bean soup and turned to look at him through the rising steam.

After a few moments Nicu had found the passage. “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” He hesitated.

“Go on,” Mama encouraged.

“Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”

Glancing up, Nicu met his mother's kind gaze. "Oh, Mama," he whispered, tears coming again to his eyes.

Mama placed a hand on his shoulder. "Never forget this, my son. When others treat us wrongly, it is for Jesus' sake. We have nothing to be ashamed of."

Nicu watched as she turned back to her work. The Bible, still open on his knees, felt warm and comforting.

3

The Good Shepherd

The Sunday evening service was over, and young people were crowding around the entrance doors. Thirteen-year-old Nicu dodged around a huddle of older boys, trying to keep up with his friends who were hurrying down the steps. He stopped short when one of the older boys caught his arm. “Hey, Nicu, there’s something you should see,” Gheorghe said, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

“What’s that?”

Gheorghe winked. “Come along with us to the cinema, and you’ll see.”

Nicu stared. Gheorghe was at least seventeen—five years older than he—and knew as well as he did that the church did not allow them to go to movies. Besides, his parents would never allow it. Why was Gheorghe inviting him to go along?

“We’re heading over there right now.” Gheorghe’s voice sounded warm and friendly. “It’ll be lots of fun! Just don’t tell your parents. They’ll never find out you were there.”

Shaking his head, Nicu started to turn away. A mocking voice stopped him. “What? Are you scared?” The other boys snickered.

That did it. He was not going to let these boys call him a coward!

But Nicu did not enjoy the movie at the village hall. The two hours were torture. He stood shaking at the window, afraid his parents would come

and find him there. When at last the lights came on, his worst fears were realized. There was Tata, standing outside!

Nicu didn't wait for the other boys. His heart sinking, he went out into the darkness. Tata was waiting for him, tall and stern and sad. He asked only one question: "Why did you do this?"

As they walked home through the night, Tata said, "You are young, Nicu, but those boys know you are already thought highly of at church. They wanted you along so that if they were caught, they could point at you and say, 'He was there too.'"

Nicu hung his head. He knew it was going to take time to rebuild the confidence that people had had in him.

"Your mother put food on the table for you and went to bed," Tata went on. "She was crying."

Nicu fought back tears of his own. "I can't eat, Tata. I'll never do this again—I promise."

He renewed that promise in his heart the next day when Mama took him aside and prayed with him. His parents were doing their best to train him in the way he should go, and he was determined never to part from it again.

"Hey, Nicu!"

Nicu, swept out the school doors by a jostling crowd of students, glanced back. His friend Feri broke into a jog and caught up with him outside. "Are you going straight home?"

"I have to take the lambs out to the pasture, so I should get home right away. What's up?"

"I thought maybe we could play football or something, but I guess you have other things to do." The boys turned onto their home street. The weather was turning cool as the early school days slipped toward autumn. "I like school pretty well this year," Feri confided.

“I like it too. I chose to go to French class right away, rather than go back to Russian—and I have a good teacher.”

“At least this one doesn’t punch your ear with a spindle tip.” Feri’s eyes narrowed.

Nicu shrugged, not wanting to think about it anymore. “Here’s my gate. I’ll see you later, Feri.”

“Bye.” Feri waved as Nicu opened the gate. For a moment he stood still, watching Feri continue down the street. The German boy was a good friend.

Closing the gate again, he slipped into the house. His mother was in the kitchen, slicing bread and cheese. “There you are,” she said, looking up with a smile. “I saw you walking with Feri.”

“We always walk home together.” Nicu set his lunch pail on the counter. “I wish I could spend time with him in the evenings, though.”

“Once winter comes, you’ll have more time,” Catarina said. “You won’t have to go out with the lambs as much. Here, I packed a little bread and cheese for you to take along to the pasture.”

“Thanks, Mama.” Nicu took the brown paper sack and hurried out the door to the barn. The lambs in their stall bleated for joy when they saw him coming.

Nicu led the flock out to the pasture. Rolling hills spread out under the azure sky, dappled with fleecy white clouds. Distant mountains rose tall and majestic, and the wind ruffled through flower-brocaded grasses at his bare feet. He sank down into the soft grass and opened the paper sack his mother had given him, letting the lambs frisk and graze around him.

As he watched the lambs, Nicu’s thoughts roamed. It was hard to believe that in a few months he would celebrate his fourteenth birthday. He was getting older and didn’t have long to be at home anymore. Nicu knew that when he turned fourteen he would be sent to boarding school for more education. It was what his father wanted. “I don’t want you to follow me in this job as a mason, son,” Petre would say. “Building with stones,

cement, and brick is heavy, difficult work, and you aren't that robust. I want you to go to school."

Nicu liked watching Tata work and wished he could do it himself. But what Tata said was the final word on the subject. He didn't mind, though. All the other young people in the village had to go to school too. Tata wanted him to attend high school, but it cost too much. The boarding school's price wasn't as high.

Crumpling up the now-empty paper sack, Nicu stretched out in the grass. He stroked a lamb's thick woolen coat as it wandered by. Other lambs drifted close, then farther away as they searched for grass. Nicu rolled over onto his back. The sun touched his face, its warmth making him drowsy. The peaceful setting quieted his thoughts, lulling him to sleep.

Nicu awoke with a start. A hand was shaking his shoulder. He looked up to see a man from the village standing over him. "You must have been deep in dreamland," the man chuckled.

"Where am I?" Nicu rubbed his eyes and looked around, still only half-aware of his surroundings. The sun was sinking toward the west, throwing long, cool shadows across the hills. How long had he slept?

Then a sudden thought struck him, and he sat up straight. "Where are my lambs?"

"They're here," the man assured him, still chuckling. "You must be a good shepherd if they didn't wander off while you slept!"

Then Nicu saw it—the flock of lambs all around him, still frisking and grazing as they had before he had fallen asleep. *A good shepherd*, the village man had said. It reminded him of what the pastor had preached in church recently. "If you're a good shepherd, the sheep will stay around you. Jesus is our Shepherd, and we want to follow Him." Unlike him, Nicu knew, the Good Shepherd never slept, but always watched over His flock. "I know my sheep, and am known of mine," the pastor had quoted. "I lay down my life for the sheep." Nicu knew that such a Shepherd would keep His flock forever.

Standing up, Nicu called to his lambs and led them homeward.

4

The Decision

How Catarina's mother-heart ached to see her son ready to leave for boarding school! He was still so young, only fourteen years old. His height was shorter than average, and that made him seem even younger. But his eyes were clear and steady, and the boyish lines in his face spoke of innocence and purity. Catarina had to wonder if her son would be true to what he had been taught, and if the light in his eyes would remain unclouded in the onslaught of pressures and temptations he would face in the next four years of his life. She could only pray to that end.

On the morning Nicu was to leave, the family had already gathered to pray for him. Now Catarina looked at her son. "Nicu, from now on my eyes will not see you—what you'll do, what you'll speak, or where you'll go. But don't forget, God's eyes will see you anytime and all over." She spread out her hands. "My hands are clean because I gave everything I could for you to follow Jesus. I have done my best."

Nicu looked back at her solemnly.

"I see your growth and the talents in you," Petre was saying to Nicu. Catarina brushed a hand across her eyes and focused on her husband. "I can see in you a gift for becoming a leader in the church. But in the church there will always be problems. Don't forget—the dogs are barking, but the bear controls the road. The bear keeps a straight line and isn't

distracted by the barking dogs.” His voice grew a little husky. “Keep your eyes on Jesus, son, and don’t worry about what others are doing. The water is always moving, but the stones stay where they are at.”

The boarding school was in Timișoara, a city 150 kilometers⁵ away from Câmpia. Though he planned to travel home for vacation every three months, Nicu’s parents knew their son would be basically on his own. Hard as it was, they would have to let him go and trust the Lord to watch over him.

“And so, what we see today comes from the great explosion that created the world millions of years ago.”

The teacher’s voice droned on, but Nicu wasn’t listening anymore. Folding his arms, he looked around the room. Timișoara’s boarding school was a big place, with more than three hundred boys attending. The building was several stories high and surrounded by a high barbwire fence. The schedule required the boys to wake up by 5:00 in the morning and exercise until breakfast. School started at 8:00. Sometimes the high walls and rigid schedule felt like a prison.

It hadn’t taken long for Nicu to realize that he was the only Christian in his class. But his outgoing nature had quickly won him friends. He had been glad to find a church where he could receive spiritual nourishment through preaching and the fellowship of other believers. As his friendships grew, he had learned to trust three of the church brethren as his mentors.

Nicu jerked back to the present. The dismissal bell was ringing, and the teacher was saying, “Class is dismissed.”

Standing up quickly, Nicu gathered his books. He glanced toward the front of the room. The teacher was vanishing through the door, leaving the boys still milling about. Nicu seized the moment. “Do you actually

⁵ About 93 miles. 1 kilometer = 0.62 mile.

believe all they're teaching us?" he asked Costel, who was gathering his own books nearby.

Costel straightened and shot him a puzzled look. "Why wouldn't I?"

"It goes totally against what the Bible teaches."

"The Bible?" Costel raised his eyebrows. "How do you know the world wasn't created with a big explosion?"

"The Bible says God created the world," Nicu answered.

"Where?" Costel still looked skeptical.

"In the very first verse." Though he didn't have his Bible, Nicu knew the verse by heart. The Scriptures he had read in the kitchen during his childhood came back to him now. "'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,'" he quoted. "God created the first people in the world, Adam and Eve. He put them in the Garden of Eden, but then they sinned and He drove them out. Many years later He sent His Son Jesus Christ to earth."

"Wait a minute." Iosif was standing with them now. "How do you know Jesus Christ actually existed?"

"John 3:16 says, 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' That Son is Jesus Christ," Nicu declared.

"You have no proof of it," Iosif said scornfully.

"Oh, but I do! The Scriptures speak of how Jesus was born in a manger." Impulsively, Nicu jumped up on the nearby bench. "We always celebrate His birth at Christmas!"

As his voice rose, the other boys turned to watch. Nicu was still talking, trying to convince Iosif. "The angels came to the shepherds and brought them the good tidings. Wise men traveled very far to bring gifts to Jesus. I tell you, there is indeed a Jesus Christ!"

"Preach it, Nicu!" someone called out. A wave of laughter swept through the room.

Nicu refused to back down. "All of you need to know this," he addressed

the growing crowd. "Jesus loves us so much that He died on a cross for our sins and rose again in three days to give us eternal life."

"He wouldn't have needed to bother!" another boy shouted. Hoots, whistles, and cheers met this clever comment.

Nicu hesitated, looking at the boys. They were growing excited, and in a crowd this size, anything could happen. They were all against him, and he wasn't getting anywhere. He slowly stepped down from the bench, a heavy feeling settling over his heart. Why had he ever done this? It was fine to speak to groups of people in church, but this was different. This was school, where classmates could turn against each other. It would have been better to speak to each one privately.

Picking up his books, he headed toward the door. His German friend Robert caught up with him there, a smile playing around his lips. "I like your enthusiasm, Nicu," he said. "You just need to be careful where you talk about things like that."

"I know it now, Robert," Nicu said ruefully. "Do you think it'll make any problems?"

Robert shook his head. "You're a good friend to everyone. After all, who else helps us with our schoolwork?"

Nicu grinned a little. From his seat on the back bench in the classroom, he listened well and often took notes in class. Sometimes he passed them forward under the benches to help others.

"That's a good friend, all right," Robert chuckled. "Seriously, though, the boys respect you. They know what you believe and where you stand."

Nicu was silent. He appreciated his friend's words, but he knew one thing—he wouldn't be doing this again.

After this spontaneous preaching outburst, he felt marginalized. The desire for friends began to outweigh his desire to proclaim his faith, and he determined to be a quieter Christian. Certainly God would understand his desires, would He not?

And so, gradually, Nicu allowed the spiritual disciplines that used to

mean so much to him slip away until they were no longer a priority in his life.

The table was spread with one of Mama's delicious meals—cooked cornmeal, fried eggs, bread, and cheese. Tata led in prayer, thanking God for bringing their boys home safely once again and allowing them to be together as a family. Hearing the emotion in his voice, Nicu brushed a hand across his eyes.

Since leaving for boarding school, some of his best memories were from the times he had come home for vacation. But this time was different. A cloud seemed to hang over the days that should have been filled with sunshine. If his dear mother sitting across from him would know what had been happening to him in recent months, it would hurt her. And Bunica, her face aged and wrinkled, watching her grandsons with that quiet gleam in her eyes—what would she say?

His parents found a chance to talk alone with him that afternoon in the kitchen. “How are your studies going?” Tata asked.

“Very well.” Nicu leaned back in his chair. “I’ve never had any trouble in my work.”

“Do you still attend church? Here, I made you some tea.” Catarina handed him the tea cup and sat down beside Tata.

“Thanks, Mama. Yes, I attend church,” he added. He decided, however, not to mention his waning attendance. “There’s also a famous evangelist who often comes into the college dorms to pray with us. Lots of young people get saved through Liviu Olah’s preaching.”

Tata’s eyes seemed to look straight into his heart. “How is your relationship with the Lord, son?”

Nicu shifted uneasily in his chair. He took another sip of tea. The ticking of the clock sounded loud in his ears. *Don't forget, God's eyes will see*

you anytime and all over . . . His mother's words seemed to echo in the stillness. How often those words had come to his mind in the past years when he had faced temptations! How could he tell them the truth?

"My life has been a little uncertain lately," he said carefully, searching for words. "Things haven't been going so well, and I—" He stopped short as he saw the pain in his mother's eyes. "Please pray for me," he finished quietly.

Soft and low her answer came, falling like soothing balm on his troubled heart. "We've never stopped praying for you, son."

A rain shower earlier that day had washed the earth fresh and clean. Raindrops still clung to the grass along the road, and trees were beginning to bud in early spring. But Nicu barely noticed the beauty of the March evening as he hurried down the street.

Glancing ahead, he saw the church he was attending in Timișoara. He had bribed the watchman into letting him go without reporting him, and looked forward to spending time with other believers. But now as he looked at the building that held up to eight hundred people, Nicu's steps slowed. He knew that he would soon have to make a decision—either give Christ his whole heart or turn from what he had been taught all his life and live for his own pleasure. What did he really want?

Walking slowly on, Nicu went up the steps into the church. The choir was already singing, their voices resounding throughout the room. "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see . . ."

Was it a message for him? Nicu pondered the words as the choir continued to sing. When at last the pastor rose to preach, he straightened in his seat.

Pastor Liviu Olah's message spoke of the glories of heaven and the horrors of hell. "Turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 24," he said. "Verse

35 says, 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.' There is darkness on the earth under the rule of Satan. For those who will not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, there is the fear of hell, which is eternal suffering."

Toward the end of his sermon, Pastor Liviu spoke about heaven. "The angels live in heaven, and those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ will also live there. How wonderful is the Lamb who takes away all our sins! He will reign in heaven for eternity." Closing his Bible, he looked out over the crowd. "Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God? Do you believe that He can be your Savior right now and right here?"

Nicu bowed his head, tears coming to his eyes. The burden of sin on his heart was so great that he couldn't stay in his seat a minute longer. Raising his hand, he went forward to the front of the church. As he knelt to pray, the audience seemed to fade away and he was alone with God, repenting from his sins with brokenness of spirit.

Pastor Liviu prayed for all those who had responded. When at last he rose from his knees, Nicu's face was shining with the light of God's love. The blood of Jesus had washed his soul clean and filled his heart with the Holy Spirit.

The pastor met with him after church. "God bless you for answering His call on your life, Nicu. Conviction is one of His greatest gifts, and if we respond to it, God is able to use us for His glory." His clasp was warm and strong as he shook Nicu's hand. "You're welcome to join instruction class," he went on, smiling. "We'll be meeting once a week for a couple of months before the baptism."

"Thank you, pastor. I have to get a pass whenever I leave boarding school, so I may not always be able to come. But I'll be there as often as I can."

As he descended the church steps, Nicu marveled at the peace he felt deep within. The message had brought a revival to his heart, and he knew that this was a turning point in his life.

Pastor Liviu Olah sat in his office, writing down the names of the young people he planned to baptize on October 20, 1968. There were twenty in all, with Nicolae Craiovan as the youngest. The Romanian Communist Party required a list of the people whom pastors baptized. Eighteen was the required age for baptism, and the applicants were to be from a Christian family.

All the people on this list were either eighteen years old or above—except Nicu. He would not have his birthday until December. Liviu's brow furrowed. Pastors didn't dare baptize young people before they were eighteen, but he was determined to make an exception this time. The young man hadn't always been able to attend the classes, but he was active in the church. Often he recited poems and Bible verses from memory, and he willingly helped with missionary work in the villages surrounding Timișoara. "I'm going to baptize this one!" Liviu declared aloud in the stillness of the room.

Baptismal morning dawned clear and bright, with a turquoise sky and autumn-cloaked trees. Nicu's voice carried clearly over the full church from where he stood in water at the front to recite a poem.

My life is full of you, Lord;
 With everything I worship you.
 Near to your divine cross
 I kneel and thank you . . .

When he had finished the recitation, Nicu knelt in the water. As Pastor Liviu Olah baptized him, joy filled his heart. He had made his decision, and there was no turning back.

5

Pastor Liviu

Darkness shrouded the hulking shape of the boarding school. A silver moon hung low in the sky, its pale light catching signs of activity near the window at the corner on the second floor. A cluster of boys surrounded it, watching the lithe figure descend the wall to the ground. The young man hit the ground running and didn't stop until he reached the road. Pausing, he looked back. His classmates had already closed the window, but he knew they would open it again when he ascended the wall upon his return.

Setting a rapid pace, Nicu hurried down the street. Stars shone high above, and night creatures filled the air with their music. The church service started at 6:00, but he hadn't been able to receive a pass to leave the school's campus. Undaunted, he had decided to sneak out through the bathroom window and attend.

When Nicu strode into the entry, he found Pastor Liviu stepping out of the pastor's office. "Peace be with you, young man," he said, reaching out to shake Nicu's hand. "How are things going?"

Nicu smiled. "Very well, pastor." Now in his fourth year of boarding school, he had recently started working at a factory as an engineer. It was a part of the school's system—one day of the week was school, and the other days he worked in the factory, practicing what he was learning. "God has been good to me."

"Do you have a word to share for Him?" Liviu asked.

"I took some notes in my personal devotions this morning," Nicu said quietly. "I was reading in Matthew 24, and it really spoke to me."

"That chapter speaks about the Lord's return, right?"

"Yes."

Pastor Liviu's gaze was keen. "Do you have your notes with you?"

"I have them here in my Bible." Nicu opened his Bible and took out two sheets of paper. He watched Liviu's face closely as he read over the notes. At length Liviu looked up. "Would you be willing to preach tonight for ten minutes?"

Nicu didn't hesitate. "I'm willing." It was common for young men who'd been baptized to preach before the church. He followed the pastor to the front, where they sat down on the bench. During the singing, he studied his notes and prayed that God would speak to the people through his message.

At last Nicu walked up behind the pulpit. Opening his Bible and notes, he looked out over the crowd. For a moment the sea of eight hundred faces swam before him; and then, far away at the back of the room, one face came sharply into focus.

What is he doing here? Caught off guard, Nicu swallowed. He saw the second director of the boarding school every day—but never before at church! *Either he's a Christian, or he's here to see who's attending.*

Gripping the edge of the pulpit, Nicu spoke, his voice strong and steady. "I greet you in Jesus' name. I would like to read in Matthew 24."

Director Marion walked down the street, the passage Nicu had read still ringing in his ears. "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. . . . Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh. . . . But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming . . . the lord of that servant

shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

It was clear that Nicu believed the words he had preached. How many seventeen-year-old boys had such a strong faith? Deep in thought, the director opened his home gate. He slept little that night. By morning he had made up his mind. He would send for Nicu and talk to him personally in his office on Monday.

The footsteps that came up the stairs on Monday were quick and unfaltering, and Nicu’s dark eyes were fearless as he walked into the room. Behind the desk, Marion cleared his throat. “How did you get to church?” he asked.

Nicu’s clear gaze met his. “I went through a window.”

The director cleared his throat once more. “If you want to go to church again, come to me and I’ll give you a permission slip.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You are dismissed.”

Nicu closed the door quietly, wondering what was going through the director’s mind. Marion carried himself with dignity and took life seriously. Had he grown up in a Christian family? Did he know Christ as his Lord and Savior?

Nicu never saw Marion at church again. As the days went by, he prayed often for his school director.

Nicu was eighteen, with a steady, straight-forward gaze, the boyish lines in his face maturing into young manhood. As he stood on the platform to receive his graduation diploma, Nicu felt a mixture of sadness and anticipation in his heart. The past four years had done much to broaden his horizons and mold his character. A chapter in his life was closing, but a new one was opening. What lay in the years ahead? What sorrows would

he have to face? What joys?

Several months later Nicu visited Pastor Liviu at his house. "As long as you keep your eyes on Jesus, you'll be able to stand strong through whatever comes your way," the pastor told him. "It's the key to success in life."

"That's what I want to do," Nicu responded. "But I find that I have to be constantly on guard."

"The enemy is real," Liviu agreed thoughtfully. "He's out to get us in any way he can, but God is able to keep us." Leaning back in his chair, he changed the subject. "Tell me what has been happening in your life, Nicu."

Nicu took a sip of the coffee that Liviu's wife had served them. "After I graduated, I started working full-time in the factory. It's huge! Around 7,000 workers, all building cranes and machines. My job is to put certain parts together."

"I'm sure you don't go home as often as your parents would like."

Nicu smiled a little. "That's true. I wish I could be with my family more often."

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes. Nicu always enjoyed his visits with Liviu Olah. The pastor had good insights and encouraged him in his Christian life.

"I have a question for you, Nicu," Liviu's voice broke into his thoughts. "Would you be willing to be a leader for church youth? You'd be in charge of going out into the villages and doing missionary work, among other things."

Nicu couldn't speak for a moment. Liviu was asking him to be a leader over two hundred young people! What did the pastor see in him that made him think he was capable?

"I believe you can do it," Liviu was saying. "Your faith in God is strong, and it shines in everything you do. You have the ability to lead."

Silence fell between them for a long moment. At length Nicu lifted his head. "If you think I can do it, I'm willing."

Liviu smiled and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Let's pray together

right now, Nicu.” He closed his eyes. “Dear Lord, I pray that you will bless this young man and give him strength as he takes over these responsibilities. May he always look to you for guidance and be a blessing to those around him. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

The words flowed over Nicu like a benediction. When he finally stood to leave, the pastor clasped his hand warmly. “God be with you, son.”

“And with you, pastor.” Nicu returned the warm clasp, still feeling humbled. This pastor who had baptized him and mentored him was leaving a great impact on his life.

6

“Trust in the Lord”

Two hundred young voices rang out in the stillness of the winter air. Snow adorned roofs up and down the street, and lighted apartment windows revealed faces listening to the young people. The night was clear, with stars shining and a radiant full moon.

Zippering her coat higher, Ana Monica Bejenaru glanced across the crowd of youth. From where she stood, she had a good view of everyone. At seventeen, she enjoyed the church youth activities. This night they had gone out into the streets after the church service to sing Christmas carols. Their voices could be heard everywhere in the snowy night.

When they were finished singing, the audience began clapping from the open windows. “Let us give you something to drink,” a man called from the closest window. “We’re having a party in here, and there’s plenty of alcohol for everyone.”

“We don’t drink, sir,” Monica heard her brother Octavian call out.

“But we do invite you to come to our church tomorrow,” Nicu Craiovan added, stepping forward. “We’re planning to have a Christmas program.” Turning to the other lighted windows along the street, he raised his voice. “This invitation stands for everyone! Come to church tomorrow and celebrate the birth of Christ with us!”

As the youth moved on, Monica wondered how people would respond

to Nicu's invitation. She had noticed how active he was in the work of the Lord, and she felt he was a person of integrity. He spoke with authority and had an upright character. But would the people really come to the church service the next day?

Morning revealed the answer. From her place in the choir, Monica recognized many people from the night before crowding the church pews. As the director led them in singing "Joy to the World," the faces in the audience grew softer, as if their hearts were indeed receiving the heavenly King.

"How did Nicu do it?" Rodica asked after the service was over. "He invited the people, and they all came!" Monica was talking with three of her close friends who sang in the choir with her.

"He's well-known in the villages for doing missionary work," Estera said.

"Yes, that's right," Lidia confirmed. "He preaches the Gospel and prays with a lot of people."

Monica was silent as her friends talked on. She knew that many girls considered Nicu one of the finest young men in the youth group. Nice-looking and friendly, he knew the Bible well and was active in the church, preaching, reciting poems, and boldly praying when church members prayed audibly during services. He was in charge of activities for more than two hundred youth, and he was zealous in going out into surrounding villages and doing missionary work. She didn't know many like him.

Glancing at her watch, she announced, "I have to go. See you girls later." Clutching her song folder, she moved down the aisle. Groups of people filled the entry, and through the open doors she could see snowflakes drifting down, glinting in the sunlight.

"May I walk you home?"

Monica glanced up, startled. This wasn't the first time she had been asked that question, but never by Ștefan. She hesitated. It was common knowledge that when a boy asked to walk a girl home, he had something serious in mind. And as far as she knew, this good-looking young man was a sincere Christian. It was only polite to accept at least once. "Okay," she

said with a smile. “Let me get my coat, and then I’ll be ready.”

Minutes later they moved through the door together and down the street. “That was quite a service today, wasn’t it?” Ștefan remarked.

“I was amazed by how many people actually showed up.” Monica shivered as the wind picked up. Tying her scarf tighter, she added, “It’s sad that they’ll be going right back to the life they’ve been living before.”

Ștefan looked serious. “Maybe the service today touched someone’s heart.”

They walked on, their conversation drifting from one thing to another. It was easy to talk to Ștefan, but by the time he left her at the door, Monica knew she would not be accepting any more proposals from him. Ștefan was nice and had a good testimony, but she didn’t feel he was the one she wanted in her life.

In her room that night, Monica spent extra time in prayer during her personal devotions. “More than anything, Lord, I want your will to be done in my life,” she whispered. “Please help me to keep my heart for you alone. If there is someone for me, I trust you to lead us together in your perfect timing.”

Peace stole into her heart, assuring her that God was indeed in control of her life. With a smile she closed her Bible and climbed into bed.

Nicu sat at his desk, gazing unseeingly at the open Bible before him. Today was his birthday. Where had the time gone? He was twenty-one now, and it didn’t seem long since his childhood. It was hard to believe that some men were married by this age.

Lifting his head, Nicu stared out the window. He wasn’t blind to how several of the youth girls felt about him, but only one stood out. With her brown hair, hazel eyes, and sweet smile, Ana Monica Bejenaru was beautiful. She sang in the choir and had a peaceful soul. He admired the latter

quality most of all. When he chose a wife, he wanted to look at the heart, and not only the beauty.

But would Monica accept him?

Nicu shifted restlessly. Other young men had tried to begin a relationship with Monica, and it hadn't worked out. Who was he to think it would be any different for him? But he had been thinking about this for a while already, making it a matter of prayer. What did God want him to do?

His glance fell on the Bible again. "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."

Bowing his head, Nicu began to pray. He remained in that position for a long time.

Monica felt as though her heart was singing a summer song with the birds as she slipped out of her home gate. The choir always met early to practice before church, and this Sunday evening was perfect for a stroll.

Besides, she wanted to spend some time alone with God. Was He leading her to marry Nicolae Craiovan? They had been walking home from church together for a month now, and as she had learned to know him better, she discovered that this young man had high ideals. Out of all the girls, why had he chosen her? Could she ever measure up to what he was looking for in a wife?

Nicu was burning for the work of the Lord; she knew that. And their courtship was clean and pure. "I can see your hand in this, Lord," she whispered, looking up toward the sky. "But more than anything, I want your will to be done. Is this from you? Help me to trust your leading!"

Twilight was stealing across the land when Nicu and Monica left the church together after the service. "I was blessed by the baptismal service today," Nicu said. "Pastor Liviu always preaches such stirring messages."

Monica smiled. “I felt great joy when I was baptized.” Crickets were starting to sing, and early stars were appearing. It felt right to be walking with Nicu, discussing the day’s events.

“It’s been several years since I was baptized, but it was a happy day for me too,” Nicu was saying.

“Pastor Liviu baptized you, didn’t he?”

“Yes. He has influenced me greatly. So many people have impacted my life—some just through stories I’ve heard. I never knew my grandfather, but I know he was a warrior for God.”

“Did you hear stories about him as a child?”

Nicu nodded. “When my *bunicu* (grandfather) was young, he served in the army. There was a minister who talked to them, and Bunicu became a believer. When he went home, he started preaching on the streets and in houses. He walked up and down hills to visit churches in all kinds of weather!”

Monica smiled. It sounded like the young man walking beside her. “How did he die?” she asked softly.

“He died in 1947 while preaching behind the pulpit. That was here in Timișoara, where the yearly church meeting was being held in a Baptist church. It was a shock to everyone,” Nicu added quietly. “The last words of Bunicu’s message were, ‘And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.’ When his daughter Ana saw him die, she received such a shock that she never recovered. She died five months later; she was only sixteen years old.”

“So young,” Monica murmured. “How sad!”

“My grandfather was only fifty-two years old when he died, but his life had been busy and fulfilling,” Nicu explained. “When one of the churches was closed, it was a great blow to him. It even affected his health.” He paused and grinned at her. “I’ve always thought I have a good heritage.”

She smiled back. “It is inspiring. My grandfather on Mama’s side was

also a church leader. He preached and directed the chorus. During World War I, Hungarian soldiers came and set their house on fire, forcing them to leave. My mother's family fled here to Timișoara, and this is where I grew up."

"What was your childhood like?" Nicu wondered.

Monica's eyes took on a reflective look. "I had a good childhood, and I grew up with singing and prayer. Mama taught us not to speak negatively about anyone. If we didn't have a good thing to say, we were to stay quiet!

"My grandfather on my *tata's* side also gave me a good heritage," she went on reflectively. "My parents told me the story of when the government took my *bunicu's* land away. Bunicu's family moved to the collective farm, but there was hardly enough food to survive.

"The government had taken their corn and potatoes, but Bunicu still had a bag of wheat. He wanted to keep his wheat safe, so he prayed, 'Lord, if I hide this big bag of wheat, they'll find it. But if *you* hide it, they won't find it.'

"Then the thought came to Bunicu to put this bag of wheat under a nut tree in the vegetable garden. That night snow covered everything, hiding all the tracks he had made. When the soldiers came, they searched everywhere except under that tree. They couldn't find anything, and finally they left."

Nicu smiled. "What a story! It strengthens my faith."

Monica nodded. "Bunicu taught his faith to Tata. When Tata broke his back in a work-related accident and became unable to work, he felt he wasn't worth much anymore. But he became full of spiritual strength. I was young when he told us we need to give all our fears to the Lord, because He can take care of them. 'God makes no mistakes,' he told me. That made a great impression on me."

They had reached Monica's home gate by now. Darkness was deepening all around them as more creatures joined the night's chorus. "I'll say good night here," Nicu said, smiling. Because of his convictions, he never came into the house alone with her, and Monica respected him for it. "May I

see you next week?”

Glancing up, she smiled shyly. “You may. Good night.”

“Good night, Monica.” Nicu closed the gate and turned to walk home-ward, joy filling his heart. Monica’s gentle, virtuous character inspired him to be the best he could be for her sake. The Bible verses he had read before he started asking to walk her home came to his mind again. “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him . . . ”

Glancing toward the starry heavens, Nicu offered a silent prayer. *I want to keep trusting you for direction in my future, dear Lord. May your will be done.*

7

“Not My Will”

September of 1972 was painting the forests with gold, orange, and russet colors. The rustling fields waited for harvest, and flocks of geese flew south for winter. The plaintive note in their calls struck a responding chord in Nicu’s heart one evening as he walked along the fields toward the village. Had a month ever passed by so slowly?

When he had asked Monica to marry him after several months of courtship, she had been hesitant. “Let me have one month,” she had said. “I have to pray and ask God if it’s His will for us to be together for life.” Knowing that he would be forced to leave for military service in October, Nicu was eager to hear her answer. But he could do nothing except wait.

The flock of geese was flying into the sunset now, their bodies dark silhouettes against the glowing clouds. Nicu looked wistfully after them. Would the end of the month bring the answer his heart desired? “Not my will but thine be done, Lord,” he whispered.

Landscape rushed by in a blur outside the train window. Leaning her head against the back of the seat, Monica closed her eyes in silent prayer. *Am I doing the right thing in asking for these signs, Lord? I long to have your*

assurance that Nicu is the one for me. I know he's dedicated to you, but this is such a big decision. I don't want to make a mistake!

By now Monica knew she would have her parents' blessing if she decided to marry Nicu. But she was still unsure. The idea to ask for a sign had come one night the week before while she had been reading her Bible and praying. Glancing up, her gaze had fallen on a book that Nicu had loaned her. She had agreed that she would return it in two weeks. Reaching for the book, she had turned it over in her hand. *Dear Lord, tomorrow is Sunday, and Nicu and I will be walking home together from church. I'll give Nicu this book then, and if he tells me to keep it for myself, I'll take it as a sign that he is the one for me. It's something simple, but I need to know what your will is!*

Monica smiled. The young man who sought her heart had passed the first test—his book had gone home with her again and was now at home on her desk. But she still wasn't satisfied. As the train sped on, taking her to the city where she planned to spend the day, Monica reviewed the second sign she had decided to look for. "My uncle is very sick," Nicu had told her the Sunday before. "We think he's in the last days of his cancer. I'm planning to start staying with him, so we can't see each other this week."

It was Thursday now, and they had not seen each other. It was getting rather late in the week, but she hadn't given up hope yet. *If Nicu comes to see me anyway this week, I'll take it as another sign that he's the one for me.*

The train slowed, breaking into her reverie. Monica stood up, shouldering her purse. Descending the steps, she left the train station and headed out into the streets. Appetizing aromas wafted from various restaurants, reminding her that it was time to eat. But today she had decided it was more important to fast and pray for the Lord's will.

After doing her business in the city, Monica took the train home again. By the time she had walked to her gate, night had fallen. Monica found her parents in the kitchen, sipping cups of tea. "Monica! You look exhausted," exclaimed her mother, standing up. "Sit down and let me warm up something for you to eat."

“Thanks, Mama.” Sinking into a chair, Monica rubbed her temples. “I am really tired and hungry. I was fasting most of the day.”

Jacob Bejenaru looked at his daughter with concern. “I know you wanted to wait a month to answer Nicu’s request, but I’m afraid it’s hard on you.”

Monica smiled. “Don’t worry about me. I can feel that my faith is being strengthened through this.”

“Here you are.” Ana set a dish of cornmeal on the table before her daughter. “I’ll get you some tea too.”

Monica watched her mother fondly as she bustled toward the stove. The cornmeal was warm and delicious, and the aroma of tea made the kitchen seem homey. It felt good to relax with her parents.

“Nicu stopped by today,” Tata said, leaning back in his chair.

Monica glanced up sharply. “He did?”

Tata’s eyes twinkled. “He was looking for you.”

That was all Monica needed to hear. As she closed her bedroom door minutes later, her heart sang. Though she didn’t want to base her decision to marry Nicu on these signs alone, they were so helpful, giving her assurance that everything was indeed coming from God. He made no mistakes, and it was safe to trust Him with her life.

The evening Monica gave Nicu her answer was filled with smiles. The long month of waiting was over, and the future stretched before them, bright with promise.

Several clouds appeared on the horizon, however. In October Nicu would be leaving to spend a year and four months in military service. All young Romanian men were forced to go—if they resisted, they could be imprisoned. But tonight it didn’t matter. They were together, and that was enough.

Before they parted, Nicu had one last request for this beautiful young

lady who had finally promised to be his wife. "The next time we meet, you bring a list of what you expect from me after we get married, and I'll bring a list of what I expect from you. Is that all right?"

"It sounds rather scary," she admitted. "What if I disappoint you?"

He laughed a little. "We will probably both disappoint each other. Marriage is for life, and we'll get to know every aspect of each other." His eyes shone as he added, "But with God's help, I'm willing to make that commitment."

"So am I," she answered softly.

Nicu sat at his desk, pen in hand. The paper before him lay empty, but he knew how he wanted to fill it. He turned the pages of his Bible thoughtfully. He couldn't imagine Monica falling short in any of the attributes of love listed in 1 Corinthians 13. But as he had told her, marriage was for life, and they would get to know each other inside out. Could they always adhere to this chapter? *Love is longsuffering, always kind, doesn't envy, isn't easily angered . . .*

Nicu's gaze lingered on the passage as he thought about everything it meant. They would be joined in marriage and become one for life. To build their marriage on this chapter and stay with it until death required a firm, unshakeable commitment to each other and to God. But with Christ as the head of their home, they would have a threefold cord that could not be quickly broken.

With a steady hand, Nicu fell to writing. He lost track of time until a knock sounded on the door, and it opened almost at once. "Nicu? Are you here?"

"Mama!" Crossing the room quickly, he folded her in his arms. "And Tata!" He embraced his father next. "It's so good to see you!" His brothers crowded in behind them, turning the quiet room into a joyful, noisy place.

“I’m eager to see this girl you keep talking about,” Samuel said teasingly, slapping him on the back.

Nicu laughed. “And I’m eager for you to meet her.” Because of traveling difficulties, his family had never met Monica before. They were planning to announce their engagement formally that night to both families.

Half an hour later they all sat down to a delicious meal that Monica and her mother had prepared. In accordance with Nicu’s high standards, Monica’s mother sat between the engaged couple at the table. The pastor was also there to give the blessings. The evening flew by, and Nicu did not find himself alone with Monica until he was ready to leave again.

“Well, where’s your list?” he asked, smiling, as they stood together by the door. He felt reluctant to leave this celebration, held hundreds of times for other people, but never before for the two of them. What would Monica require of him? She was worthy of everything good and pure and beautiful. Could he truly give her what she needed?

Monica’s trusting gaze met his. “I don’t have a list. There’s only one thing I ask—that you remain how you are.”

For a moment he could not reply. “You honor me, Monica,” he said at length, his voice a little husky. “But I want to strive to be better—to be the best I can, for your sake.” Reaching into his pocket, he unfolded his paper. “Here is what I wrote.”

Monica caught her breath as her glance fell on the page. Nicu had written a long list. As she read the words from 1 Corinthians 13, color crept into her cheeks. “This looks scary,” she confessed, looking up. “There’s a lot to live up to. But I’ll do my best to always be what it says.”

“That’s all I ask,” he said softly. “I’m making this promise right along with you.”

As dusk deepened outside and stars studded the heavens, Nicu and Monica came before God in prayer, asking Him to bless and guide them as they pledged their lives to each other. By His grace alone would they be able to enter this new realm of life and travel its pathway.

8

“In the Army, All Are Soldiers”

Laughter filled the train car, mingling with the odors of smoke and alcohol being passed around freely. Nicu stared out the window, taking no notice of the activity around him. They had been traveling all day from Timișoara to the city of Iași, where he would be serving compulsory time in military training. It had been so hard to say goodbye to his family and friends, knowing it would likely be a long time before he would see them again. Eight hundred kilometers equaled a fourteen-hour trip, and the sixteen months he would be away seemed to stretch into infinity.

It had been hardest of all to say goodbye to the sweet girl he loved. They were planning to write, but the year ahead could not pass by quickly enough. *Oh, God, please be with me*, he breathed silently. *Help me to be strong and—*

An outburst of laughter from behind him broke into his prayer. Nicu sighed a little and sank deeper into his seat. The train was filled with fifty young men, all set to have a good time. This particular group surrounded the army captain, laughing and exchanging jokes. Nicu turned his gaze toward the window. Twilight was stealing across the land, and he knew they would be traveling through the night.

Nicu leaned closer to the window, watching the landscape rush past in a blur. What would he face this year? He knew his parents would pray

for him, and Monica had also promised to keep him in her prayers. He was going to need those prayers; he wasn't in the best of health. But no matter what the future held, he was confident that the Lord would see him through. Did He not promise in His Word to never leave or forsake him? "Fear thou not; for I am with thee," God had said in Isaiah. "Be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."

Nicu closed his eyes, praying silently as peace stole into his heart. God's presence engulfed him, and he relaxed.

After one day and night on the train, the boys reached Iași. There they were taken to the army camp and forced to dress like soldiers, with uniforms and shaved hair. As they stood at attention, giving their names one by one to the army officer for registration, Nicu was startled to hear a familiar voice across the room. He hadn't seen Costică on the train, but he knew the man's parents from church. Costică did not attend services regularly.

When the boys were dismissed, Nicu made his way toward Costică through the crowd. "It's good to see a familiar face here," he said with a grin. "Where were you sitting on the train?"

"I was in the group with the captain." Costică looked different, dressed in his army uniform and cap.

"Really? I didn't notice you."

"We were trying to be friends with the captain," Costică said, shrugging. "He has a high position in the army, you know."

"So did you become friends?"

Costică seemed to hesitate. "He was easy to get along with. We gave him some alcohol and he got drunk." He stopped short, looking a little ashamed. "I'd like to work in the colonel's office," he said, changing the subject abruptly.

Nicu knew what he meant. The group of fifty men had been tested for

the best penmanship when they had arrived. Whoever was chosen would work for the colonel, who was under the highest commander in the army and needed a secretary.

“I’m sure we’ll hear who’s chosen soon enough,” Nicu remarked. It was clear that Costică did not stand for Christ, although he came from a Repentant family.

“As you know, the colonel needs a secretary.” The army major met the captain’s gaze. “We have tested the fifty men brought from Timișoara to see who has the best penmanship for the job. Of them all, Nicu Craiovan has the best handwriting.” He paused, glancing at the file in his hand. “But he is a Repentant.”

The captain weighed his words before speaking. “Nicu has the best handwriting, but I have another man who can work for the colonel.”

“Who are you suggesting?”

“His name is Costică.”

The major paged through the files, then stopped. He studied the page silently for a moment. “Costică’s file says nothing about his religion. Is he not a Repentant?”

“No.” The captain didn’t mention how Costică and the boys had befriended him during the long train ride from Timișoara to Iași. Nor did he mention the alcohol they had given him or the jokes they had exchanged. But there was no doubt in his mind—the boy was not a Christian.

The major sat thinking. “Very well,” he said at length. “We will ask Costică to work for the colonel instead of Nicu.”

“You won’t regret it, officer. Costică will do a fine job.”

The major looked up. “Did Nicu cause problems on the way here?”

“No,” he answered quickly. “Not at all. But I think there’s a better place for him.”

"That may well be," said the major, nodding. "Good day."

Opening the office door, the captain saluted. "Good day, sir."

The room was filled with soldiers all standing in place, eyes riveted on their instructor, Nicu Craiovan. The major stood at the back of the room, watching and taking notes. The boys who came to the military spent the first three months in school, where they received training to be leaders. Nicu had been brought to the base several weeks ago, where he had begun instructing new soldiers in what he had learned. It was instruction time now, and the major had come to see how Nicu was doing.

The next morning he sent for Nicu. "I want to talk with you about what I observed yesterday."

"Yes, sir." Nicu sounded calm, but there was a question in his eyes.

The major went straight to the point. "You have a gift for leadership, Craiovan. It is clear that you are obedient to authority."

Nicu smiled a little. "I grew up under my father this way, sir. When he told us to do something, we were expected to do it instantly, and do it right."

The major leaned forward. "We need a person like you, Craiovan, to be active and obey what you're asked to do. I've decided to send you to a school where you'll be trained for a higher position in the army. You have a gift for commanding and giving orders, and I want to see you become even better in this work."

Something shifted in Nicu's clear dark eyes, and the major knew what his answer would be even before he spoke. "I'd rather not do that, sir."

"In the army, all are soldiers." The major's voice was firm, reminding him that soldiers were to obey their authorities without question.

Nicu hesitated and then straightened his shoulders. "Please don't send me there, sir," he said respectfully. "I have some health problems, and I'm

not sure that it would be good for me. Won't you send me to the medical school instead?"

The major shook his head. "It's not possible. You will do as I have told you." He paused, and his tone softened slightly. "In January you'll receive further details about this. You are dismissed."

"Yes, sir." The young man opened the door quietly and stepped out of the office. Still leaning forward across his desk, the major watched him go. He shook his head. It was absurd that Nicolae Craiovan wanted to throw this opportunity away. He had the potential to become one of the best commanders in the army.

Nicu walked slowly down the hall, his thoughts whirling. It was true that he wasn't in the best of health, but he had been thinking of much more than that when he had declined the position the major wanted him to take. It was grueling work; besides, he wanted no part in the fighting if war actually did come. He shuddered at the very thought of killing a person. It went directly against God's commandments. He would much rather learn how to help those who were wounded on the battlefield.

Yet what could he do? In the army soldiers didn't have the right to ask for what they wanted. If only he could have helped the colonel instead of Costică. He would even welcome a job as a cook. But he could not choose. If he didn't find a way to go to medical school, he would have to obey the major's orders.

What did God want him to do? Unless He intervened with the major's plans, there was no way out of this. Nicu slipped into his dorm, glancing out the window. It was dark now, but he wouldn't be on duty to keep watch until midnight.

He lay awake for a long time, staring into the darkness. Was there absolutely nothing he could do? Going to an officer closer to his own rank had

availed nothing. "I won't do it," the officer had declared when Nicu asked him to go to the major and put in a good word for him. They were determined to increase his rank in the army.

Outside, the wind picked up, swirling snow against the window. It would soon be Christmas, and Nicu had heard many of the soldiers talking about home. How he would love to go home for Christmas! They had always tried to be together as a family for that special day, but he wasn't going to make it this year. In his mind's eye he could picture Mama, her face flushed and happy as she prepared the traditional dinner. Tata, tall at the head of the table as he led in prayer. His brothers, reciting poems and singing by the door.

He thought of Monica—of the sweet, unpretentious beauty that came from within and crowned her womanhood. How wonderful it would be to see her again! Letters simply weren't the same as seeing each other face to face, though they wrote almost daily. As he watched the swirling snow through the window, Nicu's thoughts turned heavenward once again. *Oh, God, I need your help. I don't want to go to this school for training to be a commander in the army. Please show me what I can do to move the major's heart!*

As soon as the clock struck midnight, Nicu slid out of bed. In the bunks around him, he could hear the soft breathing and snores of other soldiers as they slept. Carefully lifting his mattress, he felt underneath. Yes—there it was—his fingers were touching something small and hard. In a moment the New Testament was in his hand, glinting in the moonlight that slanted through the window.

The soldiers weren't allowed to have Christian books, and Nicu kept his Bible under the mattress. Only when no one was around could he read it, mostly when he was on watch from midnight to 3:00 a.m. Slipping the book into his pocket, Nicu went out the door to exchange places with the other guard on duty.

It was while he was reading the Gospel of Luke that an idea began to take shape in Nicu's mind. Perhaps he could write home and ask for something

to take to the major as a Christmas gift. It was the only thing he could think of to try. *If this doesn't work—*

Nicu shut off the rest of the thought and read the verse in Luke 18:27 again. “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.” He would have to commit this into God’s hands and trust Him for the outcome.

9

The Answer

Snowflakes fell fast and thick to the ground, nearly blinding Nicu as he turned his face into the wind. He glanced at the package in his hand. At his request, his mother had sent him two sets of six knives he had made earlier in the factory. He was taking them now to the major as a Christmas gift.

Sudden apprehension gripped him, and Nicu closed his eyes tightly. How would this turn out? Unless God moved the major's heart, it wasn't going to work.

The stairway that led up to the major's office was empty. Outside the door, Nicu hesitated, bowing his head in a brief prayer. Then he reached out and knocked.

"Craiovan?" The major met him at the door. "You wished to see me?"

"I did, sir." Nicu stepped inside, smiling. "I wanted to wish you a happy Christmas and bring you a little gift."

"Thank you." The words were sincere, but Nicu caught the major's quick glance. Taking the gift, he walked around behind his desk and sat down in the chair. He placed the package on the desk and gazed at it for a moment in meaningful silence. At last he looked straight into Nicu's eyes and spoke again, his voice quiet. "What do you want from me?"

Nicu didn't hesitate with his answer. "I want to go to medical school."

The major's brow furrowed, and he looked away. "I cannot promise,"

he said at length. "Go, and I'll think about it." Without doubt, he had seen right through the Christmas gift. What would he decide? There was nothing Nicu could do but wait.

"You'll go to medical school, Craiovan."

As the officer paused, Nicu's spirits soared. Could this be the same man who had refused to approach the major and put in a good word for him? Now his gruff tone was almost genial.

"You realize that permission for this has not been granted easily," the officer went on, looking at him closely.

"Yes, sir." How could this officer know what had really moved the heart of the major? As he left the office minutes later, Nicu's heart filled with a song of thanksgiving. Once again, God had worked on his behalf, making a way for him to avoid harming his fellowmen.⁶

The room was overflowing with soldiers, officers, and their wives. Nicu felt his throat tighten as he stood on the platform, gazing out across the crowd. Could he recite this poem without breaking down?

It was March now—three months since he had first started attending medical school. He had thrown himself into his studies and would soon be sent to an army camp in Bucharest for another three months. Today, however, this was the furthest thing from his mind. March 8 was Women's Day. What was his own mother doing right now? If only he could be at home with her! But he would honor her with the church poem he planned to recite.

⁶ As a conservative Anabaptist publisher that believes the Scriptural teaching on nonresistance, we do not support military participation in any form. However, we can appreciate Nicu's exemplary behavior while in service: his effort to avoid becoming a commander, opting rather to study in the medical field; his diligent study of the Word; and his aversion to the thought of killing people.

Stepping forward, he began to speak in a clear, strong voice. All eyes focused on him, and as he recited, Nicu noticed tears beginning to mist the eyes of the officers' wives. What were their lives like? In this communist country, were any of them raising their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?

What kind of mothers did his fellow soldiers have? Did they pray for their sons? He couldn't be thankful enough for a mother who had taught him about God from earliest childhood. Her influence had laid the foundation for his choice to serve God at a tender age.

There were other godly ladies who had influenced him as well. How clearly he remembered the two single ladies from church who had prayed that he would preach the Gospel someday! He had been only eight years old then, but their prayer had made a deep impression on him.

Another certain young lady was also largely responsible for putting his heart in the right place. As the months passed by, Monica's letters were revealing more and more of her heart to him, and he was discovering within her peaceful soul the attributes of love, grace, and total dedication to God. For the sake of these virtuous women who had impacted his life, he wanted to reach the highest standard of godly manhood.

Nicu reached the concluding line of the poem. A hush fell over the room, and all the ladies were crying. Tears stinging his own eyes, Nicu finished reciting and stepped down from the platform.

"I was so happy for you when I found out that you were allowed to go to medical school." Monica's eyes shone as she brushed a stray strand of hair from her face. Sunlight slanted through the window, bringing out green flecks in her hazel eyes.

Nicu smiled. "I can't tell you how happy I was myself."

"And you were there for three months, right?" She leaned back in her chair.

“Yes. After that I was sent to another camp in Bucharest, and now I’m back here in Iași to finish my term.” He grinned at her. “But your visit is the best part of these sixteen months.”

She laughed. “You haven’t served your full time yet. And it isn’t just me who came to visit. If my mother hadn’t come along, I wouldn’t be here at all.”

“I know.” Nicu glanced toward Monica’s mother, who was sitting across the room. “I’m very thankful she came with you.” His voice quieted. “I wish I could see folks from home more often.”

She looked at him with sympathy. “I’m sure you miss your family.”

He nodded. “We’re allowed to go home only once for fifteen days while we’re here. But there’s plenty to keep me busy, so that helps keep my mind occupied.”

“It’s July now,” she mused. “You’ve been here nine months.”

“And it’s another seven months before I come home.” He searched her face. “Has it felt long for you?”

She nodded, her cheeks coloring slightly. “Yes, it has. But I keep busy with my seamstress job at the factory, so that makes it bearable. And your letters help a lot. How has the waiting been for you?”

“Well, let’s just say I was the happiest person in Iași when you told me you were coming.” The gleam in his eyes made Monica smile. “But like I said, they keep us well-occupied here,” he added. “I guess I should be thankful for that. When I think of our future together, it seems like a long, long time away.”

“God has work for us to do between now and then,” she said softly.

“I know. But I can’t wait for the time to come when we’ll be able to serve Him together,” he answered, beaming.

10

A New Era

“Let me get this straight, Monica. Nicu came back from his term of service in February, and you’re already getting married in April?”

Monica smiled at the incredulity in her sister’s voice. “We first set the date in July and then changed it to June. Now we have our wedding day planned for April 28. It was too long to wait!”

Emanuela shook her head. “You don’t have much time to plan.”

“I know. The civil wedding is on April first, when we’ll plan everything with the officials. We have to do medical tests and paperwork—but I guess you know all that already.” The papers they would sign at the civil wedding would proclaim them married, but Monica knew that her relationship with Nicu would remain unchanged. Only after the church wedding would they consider themselves officially married.

Settling deeper into the train seat, she glanced out the window. “I’m so glad it worked for you to go shopping with me today,” she said, turning back to Emanuela. “When you got married last year, I saw firsthand how much work goes into a wedding. I’m pretty nervous about it all.”

“There is a lot to prepare,” her sister agreed. “I hope Nicu is ready for that.”

Monica sobered. Because her father wasn’t well, much of the preparation would indeed fall on Nicu’s shoulders. “I think he is. But I’ll do what

I can to help him. Both of us have been saving money for this, and Nicu's father will provide some money and food. As for me, I have lots of details to attend to. Besides shopping for new shoes today, there are other things I need to get. I'm glad for any help you can give me."

Emanuela glanced at her. "What are you planning to do about a dress?"

Monica hesitated. "I'm not sure. We don't have enough money to buy a wedding dress for me and a new suit for Nicu, plus pay for all the food."

"Then you might welcome my offer," Emanuela said quietly. "I've only worn my wedding dress and veil once, Monica. If you want to try it on, I'll bring it over tomorrow afternoon. We're the same size, so it should fit you perfectly. Consider it my gift for your wedding."

Relief shone in Monica's eyes. "Thank you, Emanuela," she said. "We'll gladly accept your offer." How like her older sister to do this! Emanuela's kind, giving heart had manifested itself in many ways throughout the years. Now she was doing all she could behind the scenes to make her younger sister's wedding day a success.

"Oh, God, come now with your blessing; oh, God, come now, and stay with us . . ."

The wedding song was a benediction and prayer all in one, swelling around the bride and groom as they walked slowly down the aisle to the front of the church. This day, April 28, 1974, was their special day, radiant with sunshine and consecrated with sacred beauty. Nicu and Monica were coming together to the marriage altar before God to pledge their lives to each other and become united for life.

Reaching the front of the church, they turned to face the crowd, standing until the choir finished singing. Nicu stole a glance at his bride, his heart swelling with emotion. Never had she looked lovelier. Slim and graceful in her long white dress, she wore a misty white veil and carried a bouquet

of calla lilies. Could it be true that from this day on she would be his?

Catching his glance, Monica smiled into his eyes. From taking a morning photograph to preparing the room at the restaurant where they would have the reception, the hours up until then had been busy and tiring for her groom. But they were finally about to make their vows before God and these witnesses. They had kept themselves pure in heart and body, and this day marked the beginning of a new era in their lives.

After the choir finished singing, the couple took their seats in front of the congregation. A prayer and simple program followed. The singing groups, poem recitation, and wedding message passed in a blur. At last they stood together again before the pastor, his questions to them both ringing solemnly in the hushed sanctuary. Were they freely taking each other as man and wife? Would they be faithful to each other for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others until death parted them? Nicu's answers rang out firmly. Monica's voice was softer but still full of conviction, her eyes misting with tears. The Lord had truly come with His blessing, uniting them with the sacred vows that were being made before Him. In life's cloud or sun, His love would be their guide and stay.

The newlyweds did not go on a wedding trip. Unable to buy an apartment of their own for the time being, they moved in with Monica's parents. They made the third family in four rooms, with her parents, married sister, and brothers still living at home. Both Nicu and Monica kept their jobs and made applications at their factories to buy an apartment. Knowing it could be three to nine years before they received the right to buy, they waited and prayed and worked together.

Spring melted into summer, and summer into fall. Winter came with frigid winds and ice, but as he walked home through the snowy streets night after night, Nicu looked forward to the heartwarming smile that

he knew would welcome him at the door. His evenings with Monica and her family were filled with light and love and laughter. Every day grew brighter, even when the winds blew and night fell early. When they found out that a baby would be added to their number in the spring, their joy increased even more.

The nippy March air chilled Nicu as he paced the street. He shivered, more from tension than the chill, and cast another anxious glance toward the hospital. This waiting was torture! Was Monica all right? When would he be able to see her and their new little one? He hadn't been able to go in with her for the delivery, but she had promised to hold up the baby by the window. Time had never seemed to stand so still as he waited.

But what was that now—a curtain fluttering at one of those second-story windows? Nicu stood still, his gaze riveted on it. That was Monica standing there—wasn't it? Yes, she was smiling down at him as she held up a small bundle to the window. The baby was wrapped in a blue blanket, and he could barely see the tiny face peeking out. Nicu glanced again at Monica, returning her smile with a broad grin and wave. God had given them a son!

Benjamin Sebastian, born on March 17, 1975, quickly became the apple of everyone's eye. When his father was around, however, no one else dared to hold Benjamin—Tata doted on his little son. Under his mother's care and surrounded by loving family, Benjamin grew strong and healthy, and life settled into a new normal.

“What do you think of it, Monica?” Nicu asked. “This apartment is small, but—”

“It might be small, but it's perfect!” Monica's eyes sparkled as she paused

by the window to look outside. “We finally have our own home and more privacy. I’m excited about that.”

Nicu joined her at the window, Benjamin in his arms. “Look out there, Benny. See all the people hurrying by?” Glancing at his wife, he added, “I’m excited about it too. Your parents have been really good to us, but I’m glad we can be on our own.”

That summer, Monica had received approval from the factory where she worked to buy an apartment. Having both saved money from their jobs, Nicu and Monica had put it together and made their first payment on the apartment. It certainly had little space to spare, but it was theirs.

“I need to check on the food.” Monica turned away from the window. “The table has to be set as well.”

“Benny and I can set the table.” Nicu ruffled a hand through Benjamin’s brown hair, so much like his own. The four-month-old cooed and grinned up at him. “We’re a good team, aren’t we, son?”

Monica flashed a smile over her shoulder as she hurried away. Cabbage soup was simmering on the stove, and after she sliced a loaf of bread, they were ready to eat.

Nicu led in prayer, offering thanks to the God who had come with His blessing on their wedding day, and whose presence was staying with them as they traveled life’s road together.

“The Lord has been good to us,” Nicu remarked as they sat down. “We have our own home now, and we’re surrounded by family and friends in the church.”

Monica’s eyes shadowed. “I can’t help but wonder what is ahead for our church, Nicu.”

He knew what she meant. The church had grown so much within the recent months that they had decided to start another church. The committee had asked Pastor Ioan Trif to open his house for church services, and there were 104 members, plus children, who attended. Ioan Trif was the pastor for both churches, and a new committee had been formed. At

twenty-five, Nicu was the youngest of the nine members on the committee and had been delegated as the church secretary.

“You said it’s almost impossible to get permission from the officials to start a new church?” Monica asked now.

“Yes, the inspector over the churches in the Timișoara district has already met with Pastor Ioan, trying to make him close his house to us. But the Lord made a way in that,” Nicu continued. “Pastor Ioan said that he was only renting the property and couldn’t make such a decision.” He paused and then sighed a little. “But I know it isn’t over yet.”

Silence fell between them for a moment, broken by the sound of Benjamin banging his spoon against the table. At length Nicu spoke again, his voice soft. “God is not limited in what He can do. I truly believe He wants us to have this church.”

Monica nodded, and the shadow in her eyes lightened. “I know. I just have to keep reminding myself that He is in control.”

They dropped the topic then, but it lingered with Nicu that night as he spent time alone with God. What indeed was ahead for their church? It was illegal to form a separate group from the churches already accepted by the government. Among the committee members, Nicu was the most knowledgeable about the law. He had been working hard to receive permission from the officials. His greatest desire was to protect their church under the law in a Biblical way, but they couldn’t have protection without authorization. And the way things were going, they would not be able to receive permission unless a miracle happened.

But he also believed his own words—that God was unlimited. Paging through his Bible, Nicu caught sight of a verse in Genesis 18: “Is any thing too hard for the LORD?” As he studied the words, his heart took new courage. If God wanted them to have this new church, He would see to it that the officials granted permission for it.