ANY WAY OUT

Twin brothers. Two paths.
No chance.

ANN VITOROVICH

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Voya,
my mate and companion for the past 50 years,
whose stories have inspired my writing,
and who came a long way to find me.

Also to my brother-in-law, Steve,
who has been such an important part of both our lives.

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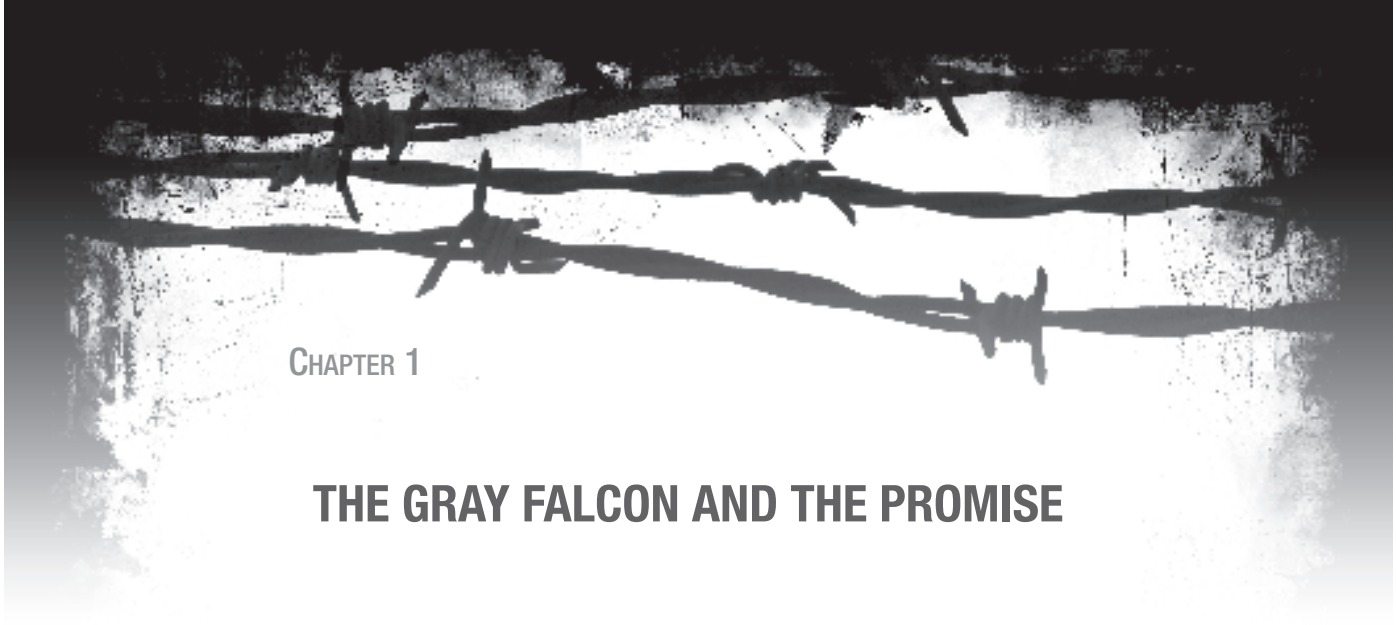

CHAPTER 1

THE GRAY FALCON AND THE PROMISE

Voja (VOH-ya) peered into the dusty display window of the Putnik Travel Agency and caught his breath. He squinted, brushed his coat sleeve across the window to wipe away the streaks made by melting snow, and looked again. There it was in the center of the display—the list he had waited for, obsessed over, fantasized about, and lived and breathed for, for the past six weeks. Yet faced with it now, he trembled and turned away.

Glancing across the street, he drew a deep breath, blew it out slowly, and turned back to the window. "Tourist Group to Rome, May 13 to 22, 1957," the poster caption read. Beneath the caption were two columns of names: A . . . B . . . V . . . , he anxiously scanned the names listed in Cyrillic alphabetical order. Five lines down, he stopped abruptly and gasped when he saw it: *Vitorovic, Vojislav*—his full name.

A laugh surged up from his belly. He wanted to cheer or shout, but the sounds of approaching footsteps and muffled conversation squelched his exuberance and the laughter slid down his throat in a great big gulp. Suddenly he was giddy with excitement. *This is my ticket to freedom!* he exulted as he turned quickly and hurried away.

Now his destination was Kalemegdan Park, a charming oasis in the center of Belgrade. Sitting like a queen on a limestone throne, the massive blue-red brick walls of an ancient Turkish fortress sprawled across the crest of the promontory overlooking the convergence of the Sava and Danube rivers. Massive stone walls gracefully terraced the steep hill. There on the top terrace, Voja found his identical twin brother, Cveja (TSVE-ya) and drew him to a secluded bench.

The two men, dressed alike in long, gray, wool Cromby coats, sat facing each other, a slight wind ruffling their wavy chestnut-brown hair. Voja's words

tumbled out like a flood. "I'm going to Rome. It's official. I just came from Putnik!" He grinned roguishly at Cveja, whose mouth hung open in surprise.

"You're not serious! I can't believe it," Cveja managed at last.

"I know, I know! I can't believe it myself," Voja rejoiced. "They posted the list today. When I spotted my name as the assistant tour guide, I nearly jumped out of my skin." He gestured wildly with his hands. "Fifteen hundred people applied. Would you believe, only 50 were approved!" He shook his head, irritated by the word "approved."

The two men stared at each other for a few moments. Then Cveja chuckled. "You must have given the UDBA *some* interview! Apparenly, you impressed them with your knowledge. Or was it your irresistible charm?" He tilted his head to the side, a mischevious grin playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Charm?" Voja tossed his head back and laughed. "The secret police are not known for being susceptible. As for the interview, it was more like an interrogation. The uniformed colonel hurled questions, and the civilian recorded my answers. After seven semesters studying the history of art and architecture, Rome is engraved on my mind—so that part was easy."

Cveja's lighthearted manner suddenly turned serious, his voice subdued. "They must expect you to return."

The twins stopped talking and sat back as if taking in the view when a young couple walking hand in hand approached. The sun had finally come out after the most recent frigid spell, and many of the city residents were enjoying the mid-January day outdoors. The couple passed, and the twins resumed their conversation.

"Evidently. We do have that September appointment with the military," Voja replied. He leaned forward. "That's one of the reasons I didn't expect to be selected."

"What about Mica [MEE-cha]?" Cveja asked. "A brother-in-law who just got out of political prison couldn't have enhanced your credentials."

Voja nodded. "Having a dissident in the family is bad enough, but not one Communist Party member to show isn't exactly a good recommendation, either." He shrugged slightly. "Strange how they ignored those facts."

After a long pause, Cveja said slowly, "For years we've dreamed of going to America. Now that it seems within our reach, it feels a little scary." He

leaned toward his brother and cleared his throat. "I never thought your scheme would work."

"It hasn't yet," Voja answered quickly. "This trip will get me out of the country. I still have to defect, and you need to escape." His face suddenly became troubled. "That's what worries me, Cveja—how you'll escape."

Escape. It was an eventuality to which Cveja had not given much serious thought. He took a deep breath, pushed out his chest, and straightened his back, meanwhile shifting his trousers with his forearms so that the seams went crooked—a nervous habit he had acquired. "Not to worry, Brother," he said confidently, "you know how persistent I can be. All I need is a guide who can take me across the border, someone I can trust."

"Sure. Some of our friends left that way," Voya said and looked away. "But what about those who disappeared, the ones we never heard from?" He turned his head and locked eyes with his brother, a sharp pain stabbing through his chest. "I don't know, Cveja. What if one of us doesn't make it?"

The unanswered question hung heavily in the air. Oblivious to the brothers' plight, pigeons cooed and darted across the concrete walk in front of the bench. Suddenly taking flight, the birds swooped down to the river, and then soared into the sky again. Here on this historic site—an ever-present reminder of the continuing struggle of the Serbs against foreign invaders and occupiers—the twins grappled with their own quest for freedom. Situated as Yugoslavia was in the Balkans at the juncture of East and West, on the fault line between Byzantium and Rome, their people were vulnerable to every conquering army that passed through. Now another alien occupier oppressed them—atheistic Communism.

Cveja broke the tension, his voice light again. "Remember, Brother, you're the trail blazer! You came into this world first. You never did let me forget that 10-minute difference." He laughed. "It's only right that you forge ahead."

They had been through all this before, back when Voja first told Cveja about the poster advertising the trip and the assistant tour guide position. The main guide would be a Communist, of course. Cveja had agreed to remain behind as surety so Voja could apply. The authorities would never grant passports to both brothers. Cveja let Voja chance the easier route, a sacrifice not lost on Voja. As the younger twin, Cveja often deferred to him, although of the two, Cveja had more determination and drive. He would persevere

when Voja might give up. This knowledge about his brother gave Voja comfort. Still he wrestled with immense feelings of guilt. He was deserting his twin, leaving him behind. They had never been separated before, and his heart ached already.

"You have until September 22," Voja reminded his brother, a hint of urgency in his voice. "If the reports are true, the United States intends to cut off immigration from Communist countries when Eisenhower leaves office. We would have to complete the immigration process before then, and with quotas opening and closing, we have no idea how long that will take." The intensity in his voice heightened. "But if you don't escape before going into the army, it will be too late when you get out. America will not be open to Yugoslavs anymore."

"Eight months. Time enough," Cveja said too confidently, but Voja still felt reassured. "Remember, your trip to Rome won't exactly be a joy ride." Cveja turned the focus back onto his brother. "Spies will infiltrate your group, pretending to be tourists. Someone will be watching your every move."

Simultaneously drawing a deep breath, the two men stood up and strolled to the black iron railing. Dense strands of green and brown ivy hung like living curtains from the rail down to the ramparts beneath. Leaning over the rail they listened to the sound of rushing waters below, the gray Sava surging into the dark-blue Danube, which was dappled with chunks of ice. Beyond the convergence of the two rivers, international freighters navigated the water highway through Central Europe to the Black Sea. The irony was not lost on the brothers—those nearby ships sailed freely, without restrictive borders or boundaries.

"Remember that promise in Jeremiah 29:11?" Voja asked. He repeated it in part, "'For I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to give you hope and a future.'" Turning around, he leaned back against the railing. "I read that verse this morning. And when I saw my name on the list, it really hit me." His throat tightened, and his eyes misted over. "It seemed like God was opening the door, as if He was saying, 'Here's your chance.' It gave me such joy!"

Cveja turned to face the city skyline, and Voja followed his gaze to the gilded tower of Belgrade's Orthodox Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel in the distance. Many times they had viewed the headless, shrunken body of Czar Lazar which had been preserved in a glass sarcophagus. The last king

of the medieval Kingdom of Serbia, which had flourished for 200 years, Czar Lazar was beheaded by the Ottoman Turks at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. This defeat plunged the Serbian Kingdom into 500 years of subjection to Ottoman Turkish rule.

"Czar Lazar wasn't deterred by overwhelming odds," Cveja mused. "His small army stood against the Islamic invaders to defend his people's freedom, land, and Orthodox Christian faith." His voice grew stronger and more confident. "It's our heritage to seek freedom."

The moist river air rose up the bluff while the two men stood contemplating their futures. The thick, dank scent filtered into their lungs and settled into their memory. Like the lore of the land that spawned them and the culture that shaped them, they would carry the memory of that scent wherever they went.

As the twins strolled along the walkway, the wind picked up. Pausing at the foot of the towering Messenger of Victory memorial, their eyes traveled up its fluted, white-marble pedestal to the bronze statue on top. The nude man stood with his back to the park, his face looking out over the rivers toward the open plain beyond—the plain from which most invasions of their country had come. In his outstretched hand he held a bronze falcon.

"*Sivi Soko* [Gray falcon]," Cveja said thoughtfully. It was the name given to the brave and courageous, the symbol of good fortune in Serbian mythology. Cveja's eyes rested on the bird, but his thoughts ran ahead. "Look at his wings. He's ready to fly."

As the sun began to fade on the horizon and shadows on the hillside lengthened, Voja glanced at his watch. "We'd better hurry, or we'll miss the trolley bus," he said. With new vigor in their steps, the twins hurried out of the park. The idea of freedom, set to music in their people's ancient, haunting ballads, now burned bright in their hearts, shouted in their minds, and filled them with secret joy.

While they waited at the trolley bus stop, Voja pointed to the sky. The clouds had parted and a bird appeared, gliding gracefully on the wind and circling high above their heads. The twins exchanged glances and then watched it fly through the endless sky, reveling in its freedom until the bird vanished from sight. *Was that a gray falcon?* Voja wondered. Before long the last trolley bus on their route home arrived, and the twins climbed aboard.